HARLEQUIN Romance

MARION LENNOX

Christmas with her Boss

Maybe his whole life had been building to this kiss.

It was a crazy thing to thinkâbut how could he think it was crazy when his hands were cupping her face and he was drawing her in to meet him? How could he think he was crazy when his mouth was lowering to hers and she was so sweet, so beautiful, so right?

She wanted him. He felt her need and his whole body responded. Their kiss was suddenly urgent, hard, demanding. It was as if a magnetic field had been created, locking them to each other, two force fields meeting, as they must, with fire at the center.

He wanted her. He feltâ¦out of control. Maybe he *was* out of control. It was Christmas Eve. He was with a woman heâd thought heâd known but he now realized he hadnât known at all.

His Meg.

Dear Reader,

Sigh. As I write this, Christmas is over for another year, and thereâs a mixture of relief and regret as I pack up the decorations. I can still hear my grandma muttering, âItâs not worth packing them up. It comes around so fast that before you know it youâll be pulling them out again.â And of course Grandmaâs right, but from here it seems a long time till I get my next hit of Santa Clausing, carols and eggnog.

Anyway, just to keep me going until next year, Iâve indulged in the next best thing to Christmas, which is a Christmas romance for you to enjoy as you take the decorations out again. My story has all my favorite things: a hero to die for, drama, fun, dogs, cows, a birthâoh, and did I mention eggnog?

I loved locking my heroine on her farm with her to-die-for boss. A billionaire bossâwhat greater gift could a girl find in her stocking on Christmas morning?

Enjoy!

Marion Lennox

MARION LENNOX

Christmas with her Boss

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Marion Lennox is a country girl, born on an Australian dairy farm. She moved onâmostly because the cows just werenât interested in her stories! Married to a âvery special doctor,â Marion writes medical romances as well as Harlequin Romance novels. (She used a different name for each category for a whileâif youâre looking for her past Harlequin Romance books search for author Trisha David, as well.) Sheâs now had more than seventy-five romance novels accepted for publication.

In her nonwriting life Marion cares for kids, cats, dogs, chooks and goldfish. She travels, and she fights her rampant garden (sheâs losing) and her house dust (sheâs lost).

Having spun in circles for the first part of her life, sheâs now stepped back from her âotherâ career, which was teaching statistics at her local university. Finally sheâs reprioritized her life, figured whatâs important and discovered the joys of deep baths, romance and chocolate.

Preferably all at the same time!

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CHAPTER ONE

âAll scheduled flights have been cancelled until after Christmas. Charter planes are no exception. Iâm sorry, maâam, but nobodyâs going anywhere.â

Meg replaced the phone as if it was about to shatter. The air around her felt sharp and dangerous. She was trying hard not to breathe.

The door to her bossâs inner sanctum was open. W S McMaster was clearing his desk, filing vital documents into his lovely calfskin briefcase. Suave, sleek and almost impossibly good-looking, the man looked what he wasâa billionaire businessman moving on to the next important thing.

But the next important thing was in New York, and W S McMasterâs personal assistant was about to tell him there were no planes for at least three days.

No-o-o-o-o-o.

âOh, Meg, Iâm so out of here.â Josie, Megâs assistant, was tugging off her office shoes and hauling on six-inch stilettos. âDanâs meeting me in five minutes and Iâm free. How cool to have Christmas fall on Monday. I have two solid days of partying until I need to sober up for the family Christmas Day.â

Meg didnât answer. She couldnât.

Josie and the rest of the office staff departed, calling Christmas greetings as they left. Yes, Christmas was on Monday. It was Friday afternoon. The corporate world closed down, right now.

Except for Meg, whose job it was to be at hand as Mr McMasterâs personal assistant at any time he was in Australia.

Mr McMaster was only in Australia for maybe ten or twelve weeks of the year, and there was little administration she had to do outside those times. It was a fabulous job. Sheâd been so lucky to get it. If sheâd messed this upâ¦

Donât go there. Focus on now. Focus on getting her boss out of the country. She gave a weak little wave to the departing staff

and tried one last phone call.

Her boss was too far away to hear, but there was little to hear anyway; just more of the same.

âHelicopters depend on air traffic controllers too?â she asked bleakly. âNo, thank you; I understand. And thereâs no way the strike can be resolved until after Christmas? Of course I know the whole country closes down from five tonight, but this is vital. Can weâ¦I donât know, take off from a paddock while no oneâs watching? Island hop to Indonesia and find a flight from there? Iâm serious; Iâll do anything.â

No and no and no.

She replaced her phone and stared at it as if it had personally betrayed herâand Mr McMaster was standing in the doorway, ready to go.

He looked ready to take on the world.

He always did, she conceded. William McMaster was thirty-six years old; heâd been born into money and heâd inherited the gene for making it. He headed a huge family corporation and the McMaster empire was growing by the day. For the last three years heâd spent two or three months a year here, growing the part of the firm that was opening mines all over Australia. He flew from one business meeting to another. While he was in Australia Meg flew with him, and as she did she realised why he had a different PA in every country. Heâd wear one out in weeks.

She was worn out now, and he was ready to leave. He was leaning against the door, waiting for her attention. He was wearing a dark Italian business suit that screamed money and taste, with a crisp white shirt, new on this morning because the hotel laundry had sent his shirts back slightly yellowed. Sheâd had a frantic scramble to get new ones. His hotel was supposed to be the best in Melbourneâhow could she top that? The hotel also had the best gym in Melbourne. He insisted on hotels with great gyms and his body proved it. Tall, dark, and far more good-looking than any man had a right to be, he was watching her now through dark, hooded eyes, as if he knew something was wrong.

Of course he knew something was wrong. You couldnât get to where he was without intelligence and intuition, and William McMaster had both in spades.

âMy car to the airport?â he queried, but softly, as if he

already suspected the answer.

âThereâs a problem,â she said, not looking at him. Her new three year contract was on her desk, waiting for her boss to sign on his way out. She shoved it under her fax, as if somehow hiding it could protect it. She *so* wanted to keep this job. While Mr McMaster was overseas she wasnât needed, but when he was in the country she moved to total commitment. Seven days out of seven. Twelve hour days, or more.

He worked like this all the time, Meg knew. She was in touch with his three other PAs, one in London, one in New York and one in Hong Kong. Wherever he went, the work of a dozen people followed. The man was driven and he drove everyone around him.

He couldnât drive her now. She *must* go home.

âThereâs a delay,â Meg managed, trying desperately to sound as if this was a mere hiccup to be sorted by six. Six, the time his plane took off and she could catch the train home and be free.

He didnât respond. He simply waited, his dark eyes barely flickering. He was a man of few words. He expected his people to anticipate his demands and sort them.

That was what she was paid to do, but this time sheâd failed.

She couldnât hire a private jet. Helicopters needed airspace too. How long would it take a boat to get to New Zealand so he could fly from there? A week at least. No.

And hotelsâ¦ Theyâd been booked out for months for this holiday weekend. When sheâd settled his account this morning the manager already sounded tired in anticipation.

âItâs great heâs booked out early. I have people queuing. Thereâs not a room to be had in the whole city. I have people offering bribesâ¦â

âAre you intending to tell me?â

His eyes had narrowedâhe knew by now that the problem was serious. To her surprise, though, there was a gleam of suppressed amusement in his dark eyes, as if he guessed the mess her thoughts were in.

âThereâs been a snap strike by air traffic controllers,â she said, feeling ill. âThe conciliation meeting ended twenty minutes ago, with no result. All airlines are grounded indefinitely.â

She could see the airport from this office. Meg snatched a fleeting glance outside. This was the penthouse suite of the most

luxurious office block in Melbourne. The view was almost all the way to Tasmania, and normally there were planes between here and the sea.

Now the sky was empty, and her bossâs gaze had followed hers.

âNo planes,â he said slowly.

âNothing that needs airspace until after Christmas. Thereâs no guarantee even then. This isâ¦â

âAbsurd,â he snapped. âA private jetâ¦â

âRequires airspace.â She managed to meet his gaze full on. He liked direct answers; hated being messed around. Sheâd worked with him for three years now and she knew enough not to quail before that steely gaze. Sometimes this man demanded more than was humanly possible. When that happened she told him and he simply moved on.

He wasnât moving on yet.

âOrganise me a car to Sydney. Iâll fly from there.â

âThe strikeâs Australia-wide.â

âThatâs impossible. I need to be in New York for Christmas.â

Why? There was enough space in her muddled thoughts to wonder whatâor whoâwas waiting for him at home.

The gossip magazines said this man was a loner. Heâd been an only child, and his parents were wealthy to the point of obscenity, long divorced and enmeshed in society living. As far as Meg knew, he never saw them. Thereâd been an actress on his arm last time heâd been in London but the tabloids had reported her broken heart at least three months ago. And it hadnât been very broken, Meg thought wryly. She knew how much the woman had received during their short relationshipâ âSend this to Sarahâ¦ Settle Sarahâs hotel billâ¦â and now Sarah had already moved on to the next high-status partner.

So who was waiting in New York?

âI canât get you to New York,â she said, trying to stay calm. To tell it like it was.

âYouâve tried everything?â

âYes, sir.â

He stared at her for a long moment and she could see his cool brain assessing the situation. He trusted herâheâd trusted her from the moment heâd hired herâand she could tell by his

expression that already he was in Melbourne for Christmas and making the best of it.

âI can work here,â he said, angry but seemingly resigned. Frequent flyers knew that sometimes factors moved out of their control, and she wouldnât be fired for this. âIâll need to make some fast arrangements, though. We can use the time to sort the Berswood deal. Thatâs urgent enough.â

Deep breath. Just say it.

âMr McMaster, the Australian corporate world closes down at five this afternoon,â she said, meeting his gaze square on. âThis entire building will be shutting down. Thereâll be no air conditioning, no servicing; the place will be locked. The business district will be deserted. You pay me to be in charge of this office and Iâve already let the staff leave. And you canât sort the Berswood contract. Thereâll be no one at Berswood to sort it with.â

She was meeting her bossâs gaze, tilting her chin, trying to sound calmly confident instead of defiant and scared.

She was definitely scared.

McMasterâs gaze was almost blank, but she knew there was nothing blank about what he was thinking. This man sorted multi-million business deals in the time it took her to apply lipstick. Not that she had time to apply lipstick when he was around.

âVery well,â he conceded. âYou and I can work from my hotel suite.â

You and I can work from my hotel suiteâ¦

Her face must have changed again. He got it. He always knew.

âThereâs a problem there, too?â

âSir, thereâs no rooms.â

âIf I have to change hotels I will,â he snapped, but she shook her head. This was why sheâd be fired. It was something she should have foreseen. At the first rumour she should have booked, but sheâd missed the rumours.

Sheâd been frantic in the Christmas lead up, and sheâd done her shopping in one crazy rush last night. The shops had been open all night. McMaster had let her go at eleven and sheâd shopped until three. Then sheâd fallen into an exhausted sleepâand been woken to a demand for clean shirts. Sheâd sorted

it and been back in the office at seven, but her normally incisive scheduling had let her down. Sheâd missed listening to the morning news.

Fallback positionâ¦ What was that?

There wasnât one.

âThere really are no rooms,â she said, as calmly as she could. âThe countryâs full of trapped people. You left your hotel before seven this morning. Most people book out later. By eight the rumours had started and people simply refused to leave. If Iâd figured this out this morningâ¦ I didnât and Iâm sorry. Thereâs a major Hollywood blockbuster being filmed on location just out of Melbourne. All the cast were due to fly out tonight. Theyâve block-booked every luxury hotel in Melbourne and theyâre prepared to pay whatever it takes. The cheap places are overwhelmed by groups who canât get home. People are camping at the airport. There really is nothing.â

She hesitated, hating to throw it back to him, knowing she had no choice. âSirâ¦ Do you have friends? Your parentsâ¦There must be people you know?â

There was a momentâs loaded silence. Then, âYouâre telling me to contact my parentsâ friends?â The anger in his voice frightened her.

âNo, Iâ¦â

âThere is no way I will contact any friend of my parentsâor anyone else. Youâre suggesting I ask for charity?â

âOf course not, butâ¦â

âTo impose myself on someone elseâs Christmasâ¦ I will not.â

âSirâ¦â

âSo, taking away the personal option, where,â he said in a voice that dripped ice, âdo you suggest I stay?â

âI donât know,â she whispered.

âYouâre paid to know,â he snapped, his face dark with fury. He glanced at his watch. âYou have fifteen minutes. Iâll get documents faxed from Berswood to give me work to do over the weekend. Meanwhile, find me something. Somewhere I can work in peace. Now.â

He turned and slammed back into his office and, for the first time in her entire life, Meg felt like having hysterics. Serious hysterics.

Hysterics wouldnât help. Where? Where?

Somewhere he could work in peace?

She could organise a mattress and a sleeping bag here, she thought, feeling more and more out of control. But even this officeâ¦without air conditioningâ¦

No. Her job was so ended.

And moreâ¦ In a little more than an hour, the train to Tandaroit would leave without her. Christmas was waiting. As well as that, there was hay waiting, ready to spoil if it wasnât harvested. She must go home.

She made one more miserable phone call, to a dealer in hotel rooms. Unless sheâd take the absolute dregs there was nothing, nothing, nothing.

She sat and stared at her hands until exactly fifteen minutes later, when the door slammed open again.

âWell?â he demanded. His anger was back under control. He was icy calm, waiting for her solution. And there was only one solution to give.

âThere are no hotels.â

âSo?â

So say it. Just say it.

âSo you can come home with me,â she said, trying desperately to make her voice bright and confident. âItâs the only solution, and itâs a good one. We have a comfortable private spare room with its own bathroom, and we have the Internet. Iâll be on call for your secretarial needs. We canât have you trapped in the city over Christmas. My family and I would be pleased if you could spend Christmas with us.â

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If her bossâs face had been thunderous before, it was worse now. It was as if there were a live hand-grenade ticking between them. The pin had been pulled. Who knew how long these things took to explode?

âYouâre offering me charity,â he said at last, slowly, carefully, as if saying the word itself was like taking poison.

âItâs not charity at all,â she managed, feeling a faint stirring of anger. âWeâd love to have you.â Oooh, what a lie.

But what was the choice? Sleeping bags here was a real

possibility, awful as it seemed. She could spend Christmas trying to make this office liveable, working around a situation which was appalling. Or she could try and resurrect Christmas.

If he accepted, then heâd spend the whole time in his room with his computer, she thought. Thank the stars sheâd set up Internet access on the farm. It cost more than she could afford, but it had made Scotty jubilant and maybeâ¦just maybe it would be the decider.

âI do not want to be part of anyone elseâs Christmas,â he snapped.

âYou donât need to be. You can stay in your room and work. I can even bring your meals to your room, if you want to take it that far.â

âI canât believe this is the only solution.â

âItâs the only one I can think of.â

No matter what she did, no matter what she offered, she *would* lose her job over this, Meg thought miserably, and then she thoughtâwhy donât I quit now? She could walk away and leave this man to do whatever he wanted over Christmas.

But this was the best job. And maybeâ¦maybe heâd even enjoy it. Letty put on a great Christmas. Miracles could happen.

Send me a miracle, she pleaded, starting her Santa list right now.

âIt will work,â she said, managing to sound much more calm than she felt. âThis is a genuine offer and weâd be very pleased to have you.â She glanced at her watch, acting as if it was time to move on. Acting as if the thing had already been decided. âYou will be able to work. The room has a lovely view.â *Not exactly like this one*. âYou will be comfortable and you will be left alone. If you accept my offer, then my train leaves in an hour. Iâm sorry you canât get home but this is the best I can do.â

His face was still dark with fury.

If he was so angry, why didnât he contact someone else? she thought. Any socialite in Melbourne would be pleased to be his friend. He was invited everywhere. Surely he didnât wish to spend Christmas with her.

But it seemed he did.

âYour house is large?â

That was easy. âYes, it is.â

âNo young children?â

âNo.â Scotty was fifteen. Surely that didnât count as young.

âAnd I will have privacy?â

âYes, sir.â

âRight,â he said roughly, angrily. âIâll pay your family for my accommodation and Iâll work from there.â

âThereâs no need to pay.â

âThis is business,â he snapped. âBusiness or nothing.â

âFine,â she said, accepting the inevitable. âIâll get changed. We can walk to the station.â

âWalk?â

âItâs Christmas,â she said. âTrafficâs gridlocked and itâs four blocks.â

âI will have privacy at this place?â he demanded again, suddenly suspicious.

âAt my home,â she said, goaded. âYes, you will.â

He hesitated. âAnd your familyâ¦â

âTheyâll be glad of the extra income,â she said, knowing that this at least was true.

And it seemed it was the right thing to say. He was moving on.

âDonât think Iâm accepting this with any degree of complacency,â he snapped. âWeâll discuss this debacle after Christmas. But for nowâ¦letâs just get it over with.â

CHAPTER TWO

Where was she taking him?

Maybe he should have paid attention, but heâd stalked back into his office and worked until sheâd decreed it was time to go. Then heâd walked beside her to the station and stayed silent as she organised tickets. Heâd been too angry to do anything else, and too caught up in work. The Berswood faxes had come through just as he left, and heâd spotted a loophole that would have his lawyers busy for weeks.

Had they really thought he wouldnât notice such a problem?

As he walked to the station he was planning his course of attackâand maybe that was no accident. Burying himself in work had always been his way to block out the world, and he was not looking forward to the next three days. Three days immersed in his work, with little to alleviate it, with no hotel gym to burn energyâ¦ And missing Elinor and the kidsâ¦That hurt.

At least he had the Berswood contract to work on, he told himself as he strode beside his PA, trying to think the legal implications through as she purchased tickets and hurried to the train. Then as the train pulled out, the announcement came through that the train destination was four hours away. What theâ¦?

He and Meg had been forced to sit across the aisle from each other. He looked across at her in alarm. âFour hours?â

âWe get off earlier,â she called. âTwo and a half hours.â

Two and a half hours?

He couldnât even grill her. He sat hard against the window with barely enough room to balance his laptop. Beside him, a woman was juggling two small children, one on her knee and one in a carrycot in the aisle. Meg had someone elseâs child on her lap. There were people squashed every which way, in a train taking them who knew where?

He was heading into the unknown, with his PA.

She didnât even look like his PA, he thought as the interminable train journey proceeded, and even the Berswood deal wasnât enough to hold his attention. It seemed sheâd brought her luggage to the office so she could make a quick getaway. Once heâd grudgingly accepted her invitation, sheâd slipped into the Ladies and emergedâ¦different.

His PA normally wore a neat black suit, crisp white blouse and sensible black shoes with solid heels. She wore her hair pulled tightly into an elegant chignon. Heâd never seen her with a hair out of place.

She was now wearing hip-hugging jeans, pale blue canvas sneakersâa little bit wornâand a soft white shirt, open necked, with a collar but no sleeves.

What was more amazing was that sheâd tugged her chignon free, and her bouncing chestnut curls were flowing over her shoulders. And at her throat was a tiny Christmas angel.

The angel could have been under her corporate shirt for weeks, he thought, stunned at the transformation. She looked casual. She looked completely unbusinesslikeâand he didnât like it. He didnât like being on this train. He didnât like it that his PA was chatting happily to the woman beside her about who knew what?

He wasnât in control, and to say he wasnât accustomed to the sensation was an understatement.

William McMaster had been born in control. His parents were distant, to say the least, and heâd learned early that nursery staff came and went. If he made a fuss, they went. He seldom did make a fuss. He liked continuity; he liked his world running smoothly.

His PA was paid to make sure it did.

Meg had come to him with impeccable references. Sheâd graduated with an excellent commerce degree, sheâd moved up the corporate ladder in the banking sector and it was only when her personal circumstances changed that sheâd applied for the job with him.

âI need to spend more time with my family,â sheâd said and he hadnât asked more.

Her private life wasnât his business.

Only now it was his business. He should have asked more

questions. He was trapped with her family, whoever her family turned out to be.

While back in New Yorkâ¦

He needed to contact Elinor, urgently, but he couldnât call her now. It was three in the morning her time. Itâd have to wait.

The thought of contacting her made him feel ill. To give such disappointmentâ¦

âThereâs less than an hour to go,â Meg called across the aisle and, to his astonishment, she sounded cheerful. âDandle a baby if youâre bored. Iâm sure the lady beside you would be grateful.â

âI couldnât let him do that.â The young mother beside him looked shocked. âIâd spoil his lovely suit.â

He winced. Heâd taken off his jacket but he still looked corporate and he knew it. He had suits and gym gear. Nothing else.

Surely that couldnât be a problem. Butâ¦

Where were they going?

Heâd had visions of a suburban house with a comfortable spare room where he could lock himself in and work for three days. Heâd pay, so he wouldnât have to be social; something heâd be forced to be if he stayed with any of Melbourneâs social set. But nowâ¦ Where was she taking him?

He was a billionaire. He did not have problems like this.

How did you get off a train?

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There was a no alcohol policy on the train, which was just as well as the carriage was starting to look like a party. It was full of commuters going home for Christmas, holidaymakers, everyone escaping the city and heading bush.

Someone started a Christmas singalong, which was ridiculous, but somehow Meg found herself singing along too.

Was she punch-drunk?

No. She was someone whoâd lost the plot but there was nothing she could do about it. She had no illusions about her job. Sheâd messed things up and, even though she was doing the best she could, William McMaster had been denied his Christmas and she was responsible.

Worse, she was taking him home. He hadnât asked where

home was. He wasnât interested.

She glanced across the aisle at him and thought he so didnât belong on this train. He lookedâ¦

Fabulous, she admitted to herself, and there it was, the thing sheâd carefully suppressed since sheâd taken this job. W S McMaster was awesome. He was brilliant and powerful and more. He worked her hard but he paid magnificently; he expected the best from her and he got it.

And he was so-o-o sexy. If she wasnât careful, she knew she stood every chance of having a major crush on the guy. But sheâd realised that from the start, from that first interview, so sheâd carefully compartmentalised her life. He was her boss. Any other sensation had to be carefully put aside.

And sheâd learned from him. W S McMaster had compartments down to a fine art. There was never any hint of personal interaction between employer and employee.

But now there needed to be personal interaction. W S McMaster was coming home to her family.

Heâd better be nice to Scotty.

He didnât have to be nice to anyone.

Yes, he did, she thought. For the next few days her boundaries needed to shift. Not to be taken away, she reminded herself hastily. Just moved a little. She needed to stop thinking about him as her boss and start thinking about him as someone who should be grateful to her for providing emergency accommodation.

Sheâd made a start, deliberately getting rid of her corporate gear, making a statement that this weekend wasnât entirely an extension of their work relationship.

He could lock himself in his room for the duration, she thought. Sheâd sent a flurry of texts to Letty on the subject of which room theyâd put him in. The attic was best. There was a good bed and a desk and a comfy chair. It had its own small bathroom. The man was a serious workaholic. Maybe heâd even take his meals in his room.

âHeâs not singing,â the elderly woman beside her said. Meg had struck up an intermittent conversation with her, so she knew the connection. âYour boss. Is he not happy?â

âHeâs stuck in Australia because of the airline strike,â Meg said. âI suspect heâs homesick.â

Homesick. Sheâd spoken loudly because of the singing, but there was a sudden lull between verses and somehow her words hit silence. Suddenly everyone was looking at William.

âHomesick,â the woman beside Meg breathed, loud enough for everyone to hear; loud enough to catch Williamâs attention. âOh, thatâs awful. Do you have a wife and kiddies back home?â

âIâ¦no,â William said, clearly astonished that a stranger could be so familiar.

âSo itâll just be your parents missing you,â the woman said. âOh, I couldnât bear it. Whereâs home?â

âNew York.â The two syllables were said with bluntness bordering on rudeness, but the woman wasnât to be deflected.

âNew York City?â she breathed. âOh, where? Near Central Park?â

âMy apartment overlooks Central Park,â he conceded, and there was an awed hush.

âWill it be snowing there?â someone asked, and Meg looked at her bossâs grim face and answered for him. Sheâd checked the forecast. It was part of her job.

âThe forecast is for snow.â

âOh, and the temperature hereâs going to be boiling.â The woman doing the questioning looked as if she might burst into tears on his behalf. âYou could have made snowmen in Central Park.â

âI donâtâ¦â

âOr thrown snowballs,â someone added.

âOr made a Snowman Santa.â

âHey, did you see that movie where they fell down and made snow angels?â

âHe could do that here in the dust.â

There was general laughter, but it was sympathetic, and then the next carol started and William was mercifully left alone.

Umâ¦maybe she should have protected him from that. Maybe she shouldnât have told anyone he was her boss. Meg looked across at Williamâimmersed in his work againâand thoughtâIâm taking my boss home for Christmas and all weâre offering is dust angels. He could be having a white Christmas in Central Park.

With who?

She didnât know, and she was not going to feel bad about that, she decided. Not until he told her that he was missing a

person in particular. If he was simply going to sit in a luxury penthouse and have lobster and caviar and truffles and open gifts to himselfâ¦

She was going home to Scotty and Grandma and a hundred cows.

That was a good thought. No matter how appallingly sheâd messed up, she was still going home for Christmas.

She was very noble to share, she told herself.

Hold that thought.

Â

Tandaroit wasnât so much a station as a rail head. Thereâd been talk of closing it down but Letty had immediately presented a petition with over five thousand names on it to their local parliamentarian. No matter that Letty, Scotty and Meg seemed to be the only ones who used itâand that the names on the petition had been garnered by Letty, dressed in gumboots and overalls, sitting on the corner of one of Melbourneâs major pedestrian malls in Scottyâs now discarded wheelchair. Sheâd been holding an enormous photograph of a huge-eyed calf with a logo saying âSave Your Country Cousinsâ superimposed.

Tandaroit Station stayed.

When Letty wanted something she generally got it. Her energy was legendary. The death of her son and daughter-in-law four years ago had left her shattered, but afterwards sheâd hugged Meg and sheâd said, âThereâs nothing to do but keep going, so we keep going. Letâs get you another job.â

Megâs first thought had been to get some sort of accountancy job in Curalo, their closest city, but then theyâd found Mr McMasterâs advertisement. âYouâd be away from us almost completely for three months of the year but the rest weâd have you almost full-time. Thatâd be better for Scotty; better for all of us. And look at the pay,â Letty had said, awed. âOh, Meg, go for it.â

So sheâd gone for it, and now she was tugging her bag down from the luggage rack as William extricated himself from his wedged in position and she was thinking that was what she had to do now. Just go for it. Christmas, here we come, ready or not.

Her bag was stuck under a load of other peopleâs baggage. She gave it a fierce tug and it came loose, just as William freed

himself from his seat. She lurched backward and he caught her. And held.

He had to hold her. The train was slowing. There were youngsters sitting in the aisle, she had no hope of steadying herself and she had every chance of landing on top of a child. But her boss was holding her against him, steady as a rock in the swaying train.

And she let him hold her. She was tired and unnerved and overwrought. Sheâd been trying to be chirpy; trying to pretend everything was cool and she brought someone like her boss home for Christmas every year. Sheâd been trying to think that she didnât care that sheâd just ruined the most fantastic job sheâd ever be likely to have.

And suddenly it was all just too much. For one fleeting moment she let her guard down. She let herself lean into him, while she felt his strength, the feel of his new-this-morning crisp linen shirt, the scent of his half-a-monthâs-salary aftershaveâ¦

âOoh, I hope you two have a very happy Christmas,â the lady sheâd been sitting near said, beaming up at them in approval. âNo need for gifts for you two, then. No wonder youâre taking him home for Christmas.â And then she giggled. âYou know, I married my boss too. Best thing I ever did. Fourteen grandchildren laterâ¦ You go for it, love.â

And Meg, whoâd never blushed in her life, turned bright crimson and hauled herself out of her bossâs arms as if she were burned.

The train was shuddering to a halt. She had to manoeuvre her way through the crowds to get out.

She headed for the door, leaving her boss to follow. If he could. And she wouldnât really mind if he couldnât.

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The train dumped them and left, rolling away into the night, civilisation on wheels, leaving them where civilisation wasnât. Nine oâclock on the Tandaroit rail head. Social hub of the world. Or not. There was a single electric light above the entrance, and nothing else for as far as the eye could see.

âSoâ¦where exactly are we?â William said, sounding as if he might have just landed on Mars, but Meg wasnât listening. She was too busy staring out into the night, willing the headlights of

Lettyâs station wagon to appear.

Letty was always late. Sheâd threatened her with death if she was late tonight.

She couldnât even phone her to find out where she was. There was no mobile reception out here. And, as if in echo of her thoughtsâ¦

âThereâs no reception.â Her boss was staring incredulously at his phone.

âThereâs a land line at the farm.â

âYouâve brought me somewhere with no cellphone reception?â

Hysterics were once again very close to the surface. Meg felt ill. âItâs better than sleeping at the airport,â she snapped, feeling desperate.

âHow is it better?â He was looking where she was looking, obviously hoping for any small sign of civilisation. There wasnât any. Just a vast starlit sky and nothing and nothing and nothing.

âSheâll come.â

âWhoâll come?â

âMy grandmother,â Meg said through gritted teeth. âIf she knows whatâs good for her, sheâll come right now.â

âYour home is how far from the station?â

âEight miles.â

âEight!â

âMaybe a bit more.â

âItâs a farm?â

âYes.â

âSo Tandaroitâ¦â

She took a couple of deep breaths. Hysterics would help no one. âItâs more of a district than a town,â she admitted. âThere was a school here once, and tennis courts. Not now, though. They use the school for storing stock feed.â

âAnd your farmâs eight miles from thisâ¦hub,â he said, his voice carefully, dangerously neutral. âThatâs a little far to walk.â

âWeâre not walking.â

âI was thinking,â he said, âof how long it might take to walk back here when I decide to leave.â

That caught her. She stopped staring out into the night and stared at her boss instead. Thinking how this might look to him.

âYou mean if my family turn into axe-murderers?â she

ventured.

âIâve seen *Deliverance*.â

Her lips twitched. âWeâre not that bad.â

âYou donât own a car?â

âNo.â

âYet I pay you a very good wage.â

âWe have Lettyâs station wagon and a tractor. What else do we need?â

âYou like sitting on rail heads waiting for grandmothers who may or may not appear?â

âSheâll appear.â

âI believe,â he said, speaking slowly, as if she was ever so slightly dim, âthat I might be changing my mind about travelling to a place thatâs eight miles from a train which comesâ¦how often a day?â

âThree or four times, but it only stops here once.â

âOnce,â he said faintly. âIt stops once, eight miles away from a place that has no mobile phone reception, with a grandmother who even her granddaughter appears to be feeling homicidal about.â

Uh-oh. She ran her fingers through her hair and tried to regroup.

âNot that itâs not a very kind invitation,â he added and she choked. She was so close to the edgeâ¦

âI thought it was kind,â she managed.

âKind?â

âI could have left you in the office.â

âOr not. It was you,â he reminded her, âwho got me into this mess.â

âYou could have listened to the news on the radio this morning as well as me,â she snapped and then thoughtâhad she really said that? What little hope she had of keeping her job had finally gone.

âThatâs what I pay you for,â he snapped back.

Well, if sheâd gone this farâ¦ âI left the office at eleven last night. I was at your hotel just after six. I donât get eight hours off?â

âI pay you for twenty-four hours on call.â

âIâm not fussed about what you pay me,â she snapped. The

tension of the last few hours was suddenly erupting, and there was no way she could keep a lid on her emotions. âIâm fussed about the ten minutes I spent washing my hair this morning when I should have been listening to the radio and hearing about the airline strike. Iâm fussed about being stuck with my boss, who doesnât seem the least bit grateful that Iâm doing the best I can. And now Iâm stuck with someone who has the capacity to mess with my family Christmas if he doesnât stop making me feel guilty and if he spends the rest of Christmas playing Manhattan Millionaire stuck here, and itâs All My Fault.â

She stopped. Out of breath. Out of emotion. Out of words. And it seemed he was the same.

Well, what could he say? Should he agree? He could hardly sack her here, right now, Meg thought. If he didâ¦she and Letty really could be axe-murderers.

Or they could just leave him here, sitting on the Tandaroit station until the next train came through late tomorrow.

âDonât do it,â he growled, and she remembered too late he had an uncanny ability to read her mind. He hesitated and then obviously decided he had no choice but to be a little bit conciliatory. âItâs veryâ¦clean hair,â he ventured.

âThank you.â What else was there to say?

âThisâ¦grandmotherâ¦â

âLetty.â

âSheâs backed up by other family members? With other cars? â He was obviously moving on from her outburst, deciding the wisest thing was to ignore it.

âJust Letty.â

âAndâ¦who else?â

âScotty. My kid brother.â

âYou said no children,â he said, alarmed.

âFifteenâs not a child.â

âOkay,â he conceded. âWho else?â

âNo one.â

âWhere are your parents?â

âThey died,â she said. âFour years ago. Car crash.â

He was quick. He had it sorted straight away. âWhich is why you took the job with me?â

âSo I could get home more,â she said. âIronic, isnât it?â

But he was no longer listening. Had he been listening, anyway? âCould this be Letty?â he demanded.

Oh, pleaseâ¦ She stared into the darkness, and there it was, two pinpricks of light in the distance, growing bigger. Headlights.

â*Deliverance,*â she muttered and her boss almost visibly flinched.

âJust joking,â she said.

âDonât joke.â

âNo jokes,â she agreed and took a deep breath and picked up her holdall. âOkay, hereâs Letty and, while you may not appreciate it, we really are safe. Weâve organised you a nice private bedroom with Internet. You can use our telephone if there are people you need to contact other than over the Web. You can stay in your room and work all Christmas but Letty is one of the worldâs best cooks and here really is better than camping in the office.â

âI imagine it will be,â he said, but he didnât sound sure. âAnd I am grateful.â

âI bet you are.â

âItâs lovely hair,â he said, surprisingly. âIt would have been a shame to leave it dirty for Christmas.â

âThank you,â she managed again. Cheering up, despite herself.

Letty was coming. She could send W S McMaster to his allocated room and she could get on with Christmas.

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Anger was counterproductive. Anger would get him no where.

Yes, his PA had messed up his Christmas plans but the thing was done. And no, he should never have agreed to come with her to this middle-of-nowhere place. If heâd thought it through, maybe he could have rung a realtor and even bought a small house. Anything rather than being stuck at the beck and call of one wiry little woman called Letty who seemed to own the only set of wheels in the entire district.

They hadnât passed another car. The car they were in sounded sick enough to be worrying. There was something wrong with its silencerâas if it didnât have one. The engine was periodically missing. The gearbox seemed seriously shot. They

were jolting along an unsealed road. He was wedged in the back seat with both his and Megâs gear and Letty was talking at the top of her lungs.

âIâm late because Dave Barring popped over to check on Millicent. Millicentâs a heifer Iâm worried is going to calve over Christmas.â Letty was yelling at him over her shoulder. âDaveâs our local vet and heâs off for Christmas so I wanted a bit of reassurance. He reckons she should be right,â she told Meg. âThen I had to pick up three bags of fertiliser from Robertsonâs. Robby said if I didnât take it tonight the placeâd be locked up till after New Year. So Iâm sorry itâs a bit squashed in the back.â

âIâm fine,â he said. He wasnât.

Anger was counterproductive. If he said it often enough he might believe it.

âWe can swap if you want,â Meg said.

âYou wonât fit in the back,â Letty said. âNot with Killer.â

Letty was right. The combination of Meg and Killer would never fit in the back seat with the baggage.

Killer looked like a cross between a Labrador and an Old English sheepdog. He was huge and hairy and black as the night around them. Heâd met Meg with such exuberance that once more William had had to steady her, stopping her from being pushed right over.

While Killer had greeted Meg, Letty had greeted him with a handshake that was stronger than a manâs twice her size. Then sheâd greeted her granddaughter with a hug that made Meg wince, and then sheâd moved into organisational mode.

âYou in the back. Meg, in the front with Killer. I told Scotty Iâd be back by nine-thirty so we need to move.â

They were moving. They were flying over the corrugated road with a speed that made him feel as if he was about to lose teeth.

âSo what do we call you?â Letty said over her shoulder.

âI told you; heâs Mr McMaster,â Meg said, sounding muffled, as well she might under so much dog.

âMac?â Letty demanded.

âHeâs my boss,â Letty said, sounding desperate. âHeâs not Mac.â

âHeâs our guest for Christmas. What do we call you?â she demanded again. âHow about Mac?â

Do not let the servants become familiar.

Master William.

Mr McMaster.

Sir.

Once upon a time a woman called Hannah had called him William. To her appalling costâ¦

âHow about Bill?â Letty demanded. âThatâs short for William. Or Billy.â

âBilly?â Meg said, sounding revolted. âGrandma, can weâ¦â

âWilliam,â he said flatly, hating it.

âWillie?â Letty said, hopeful.

âWilliam.â

Letty sighed. âWillâs better. Though it is a bit short.â

âLike Meg,â Meg said.

âYou know I like Meggie.â

âAnd you know I donât answer to it. We donât have to call you anything you donât like,â Meg said over her shoulder. âIâm happy to keep calling you Mr McMaster.â

âYou are not,â Letty retorted. âNot over Christmas. And why are you calling him Mr McMaster, anyway? How long have you worked for him? Three years?â

âHe calls me Miss Jardine.â

âThen the pair of you need to come off your high horses,â Letty retorted. âMeg and William it is, and if I hear any sign of Ms or Mr then itâs Meggie and Willie for the rest of Christmas. Right?â

âOkay with me,â Meg said, resigned.

âFine,â William said.

Define *fine*.

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He was expecting hillbilly country. What he got was *Fantasia*. They sped over a crest and there it was, spread out before them, a house straight out of a fairy tale.

Or not. As he got closerâ¦

Not a fairy tale. A Christmas tableau.

The farmhouse, set well back from the road among scattered gums, was lit up like a series of flashing neon signs. It was so bright it should almost be visible from the next state.

âOh, myâ¦â Meg breathed before William could even get his breath back. âGrandma, what have you done?â

âWe both did it,â Letty said proudly. âMe and Scotty. You like our sleigh?â

The house had two chimneys, with what looked like an attic between them. The sleigh took up the entire distance between chimneys. There was a Santa protruding from the chimney on the left. Or, rather, part of Santa. His lower half. His legs were waving backwards and forwards, as if Santa had become stuck in descent. The movement wasnât smooth, so he moved gracefully from left to right, then jerked back with a movement sharp enough to dislodge vertebrae.

The house was Christmas City. There were lights from one end to the other, a myriad of fairy lights that made the house look like something out of a cartoon movie.

âIt took us days,â Letty said, pleased with the awed hush. âWhen you rang and said there was a chance you couldnât get home tonight Scotty and I were ready to shoot ourselves. Weâve worked our tails off getting this right.â

âI can see that you have,â Meg said, sounding as stunned as he was. âGrandmaâ¦â

âAnd, before you say a word, we got it all over the Internet,â Letty informed her. âScotty found it. It was a package deal advertised in July by some lady cleaning out her garage. Sheâd just bought the house and found it, and she practically paid us to take it away. Some people,â she said, slowing the car so they could admire the house in all its glory, âhave no appreciation of art.â

âBut running it,â Meg said helplessly. âItâll costâ¦â

âItâs practically all solar,â Letty cut in. âExcept Santa. Well, thereâs not a lot of solar Santa Clausâs backsides out there. We havenât quite got the legs right, but Iâll adjust them before Christmas. Stillâ¦ What do you think?â

There was suddenly a touch of anxiety in her voice. William got it, and he thought maybe this lady wasnât as tough as she sounded. She surely wanted to please this girl, Meg, sitting somewhere under her dog.

âYou climb up on that roof again and Iâll give all of your Christmas presents to the dogs. But I love it,â Meg said as the car came to a halt.

âReally?â

âI really love it.â Meg giggled. âItâs kitsch and funny and those legs are just plain adorable.â

âWhat do you think?â Letty said, and she swivelled and looked straight at him. âWill?â

âWilliam. Umâ¦â

âNo lies,â she said. âIs my Meg just humouring me?â

Meg swivelled too. She was covered in dog but somehow he managed to see her expression.

Mess with my grandma and Iâll mess with you, her look said, and it was such a look that he had to revise all over again what he thought of his competent, biddable PA.

His hostess for Christmas.

âAdorable,â he said faintly.

âYouâre lying,â Letty said, and he found himself smiling.

âI am,â he agreed, and he met Megâs glare square on. âThereâs nothing adorable about a pair of crimson trousers stuck in a chimney. However, itâs fantastical and truly in the spirit of Christmas. As soon as we came over the crest I just knew this was going to be a Christmas to remember.â

âBetter than being stuck in the office?â Meg said, starting to smile.

âBetter than the office.â Maybe.

âThen thatâs okay,â Letty said, accelerating again. âIf you like my decorations then you can stay. The pair of you.â

âYouâre very generous,â William said.

âWe are, arenât we?â Meg agreed, and hugged her dog.

And then the car pulled to a halt beside the houseâand straight away there was more dog. Killerâs relatives? William opened the door and four noses surged in, each desperate to reach him. They were all smaller than Killer, he thought with some relief. Black and white. Collies?

âFred, Milo, Turps, Roger, leave the man alone,â Meg called and the dog pack headed frantically for the other side of the car to envelope someone they obviously knew and loved. Meg was on the ground hugging handfuls of ecstatic dog, being welcomed home in truly splendid style.

William extricated himself from the car and stared down at

her. Any hint of his cool, composed PA had disappeared. Meg was being licked from every angle, she was coated with dog and she was showing every sign of loving it.

âKillerâs Megâs dog,â Letty said, surveying the scene in satisfaction. âFred and Roger are mine. Turps and Milo belong to Scotty but they all love Meg. Sheâs so good with dogs.â

Meg was well and truly buriedâand the sight gave him pause.

In twenty-four hours he should be entering his apartment overlooking Central Park. His housekeeper would have come in before him, made sure the heating was on, filled the place with provisions, even set up a tasteful tree. The place would be warm and elegant and welcoming.

Maybe not as welcoming as this.

He would have been welcomed almost as much as this on Christmas Day, he thought, and that was a bleak thought. A really bleak thought. The disappointment heâd felt when heâd learned of the air strike hit home with a vengeance.

He didnât show emotion. He was schooled not to show it. But nowâ¦

It wasnât any use thinking of it, he thought, struggling to get a grip on his feelings. Elinor would make alternative arrangements. The kids were accustomed to disappointment.

That made it worse, not better.

Donât think about it. Why rail against something he could do nothing about?

Why was the sight of this woman rolling with dog intensifying the emotion? Making him feel as if he was on the outside looking in?

Back off, he told himself. He was stuck here for three days. Make the most of it and move on.

Meg was struggling to her feet and, despite a ridiculous urge to go fend off a few dogs, he let her do it herself, regain her feet and her composure, or as much composure as a woman whoâd just been buried with dogs could have.

âNo, down. Oh, Iâve missed you guys. But whereâs Scotty?â

Scotty was watching them.

The kid in the doorway was tall and gangly and way too skinny, even allowing for an adolescent growth spurt. He had Megâs chestnut curls, Megâs freckles, Megâs clear green eyes, but Williamâs initial overriding impression was that he looked

almost emaciated. There was a scar running the length of his left cheek. He had a brace enclosing his left leg, from foot to hip.

He was looking nervously at William, but as soon as William glanced at him he turned his attention to his sister. Whoâd turned her attention to him.

âScottyâ¦â Dogs forgotten, Meg headed for her brother and enveloped him in a hug that was almost enough to take him from his feet. The kid was four or five inches taller than Megâs meagre five feet four or so, but he had no body weight to hold him down. Meg could hug as much as she wanted. There was no way Scotty could defend himself.

Not that he was defending himself. He was hugging Meg back, but with a wary glance at William over her head. Suspicious.

âHi,â William said. âIâm William.â There. Heâd said it as if it didnât hurt at all.

âIâm Scott,â the boy said, and Meg released him and turned to face William, her arm staying round her brother, her face a mixture of defensiveness and pride.

âThis is my family,â she said. âLetty and Scotty and our dogs.â

âScott,â Scott said again, only it didnât come out as it should. He was just at that age, William thought, adolescent trying desperately to be a man but his body wasnât cooperating. His voice was almost broken, but not quite.

And, aside from his breaking voice, his leg looked a mess as well. You didnât get to wear a brace that looked like scaffolding if the bones underneath werenât deeply problematic.

Meg had told him her parents had died four years ago. Had Scott been in the same car crash? The brace spoke of serious ongoing concerns.

Why hadnât he found this out? William had always prided himself on hiring on instinct rather than background checks. A background check right now would be handy.

âDid the car get you here all right?â the kid asked, and William could see he was making an effort to seem older than he was. âIt needs about six parts replacing but Grandma wonât let me touch it.â

âYou mess with that car and weâre stuck,â Letty said. âNext milk cheque Iâll get it seen to.â

âI wouldnât hurt it.â

âYouâre fifteen. Youâre hardly a mechanic.â

âYeah, but Iâve readâ¦â

âNo,â Letty snapped. âThe carâs fine.â

âI tried messing with my dadâs golf cart when I was fifteen,â William said, interrupting what he suspected to be a long running battle. âDad was away for a month. He came back and Iâd supplied him with a hundred or so extra horsepower. Sadly, he touched the accelerator and hit the garage door. The fuss! Talk about lack of appreciation.â

Scott smiled at thatâa shy smile but a smile nonetheless. So did Letty, and so did Meg. And his reaction surprised him.

He kind of liked these smiles, he decided. They took away a little of the sting of the last few hours. It seemed he could put thoughts of *Deliverance* aside. These people were decent. He could settle down here and get some work done.

And maybe he could try and make Meg smile again. Was that a thought worth considering?

âThe Internetâs down,â Scott said and smiling was suddenly the last thing on his mind.

âThe Internetâ¦â Meg said, sounding stunned. âWhatâs wrong with it?â

âThereâs been a landslip over at Tandaroit South and the lines are down. They donât know when itâll be fixed. Days probably.â

He was having trouble figuring this out. âLines?â

âTelephone lines,â Scott said, an adolescent explaining something to slightly stupid next-generation-up.

âYou use phone lines for the Internet?â

âI know, dinosaur stuff and slow as,â Scott said. âBut satellite connection costs heaps. Mickey has satellite connection, but Megâs only just figured out a way we can afford dialup.â

âAndâ¦â He checked his phone. âThereâs no mobile reception here either,â he said slowly.

âNo,â Meg told him.

âAnd now no fixed phone?â

âNo.â Meg sounded really nervousâas well she might.

âSo no Internet until the lineâs fixed?â

âWell, duh,â Scott said, sounding adolescent and a bit

belligerent. Maybe he thought his sister was about to be attacked. Maybe she was.

But William wasnât focused on Meg. He was feeling ill. To be so far from contactâ¦ He should have rung Elinor before he left Melbourne. He should have woken her. He *had* to contact her. Her entire Christmas would be ruined.

âI canât stay here,â he said through gritted teeth. âThe airportâd be better than this.â

âHey!â Letty said.

He didnât have time or space to pacify her. All he could think of was Elinorâand two small kids. âI need to use a phone,â he snapped. âNow.â

âI have supper on,â Letty said.

âThis is important. There are people waiting for me in New York.â

âBut youâre not due there until tomorrow,â Meg said, astounded. âTheyâll hardly be waiting at the airport yet.â

âI still need a phone. Sort it, Jardine,â he ordered.

He watched her long thoughtful stare, the stare heâd come to rely on. This woman was seriously good. He depended on her in a crisis.

He was depending on her now, and she didnât let him down.

âSupper first,â she said at last. âIf it can wait that long.â

Maybe it could, he conceded. âSupper first. Then what?â

âThen Iâll take you over to Scottyâ¦to Scottâs friend, Mickeyâs. Mickey lives two miles north of here and his parents have satellite connection. You can use the Internet or their Skype phone for half an hour while I catch up with Mickeyâs mum. The weekend before Christmas sheâll probably still be up.â

âI need it for moreâ¦â

âHalf an hour max,â she said, blunt and direct, as heâd come to expect. âEven thatâs a favour. Theyâre dairy farmers and itâs late now. But you should be able to talk to New York via Skype. Mind, itâll be before seven in the morning over there, so trying to wake anyone upâ¦â

âSheâll wake.â

âOf course she will,â she said, almost cordially, and he looked at her with suspicion.

âMiss Jardineâ¦â

âIâm Meg,â she said. âRemember? Meg until Iâm back on the payroll, if that ever happens.â

âI donât believe Iâve fired you.â

âSo you havenât,â she said. âAnd Christmas miracles happen. Okay, Iâll take you over to Mickeyâs and I will try and get you in touch with New York but letâs not go anywhere until weâve had some of Lettyâs mango trifle. You have made me mango trifle, havenât you, Grandma?â

âOf course.â

âThen what are we waiting for?â she demanded, and she grabbed her bag, manoeuvred her way through her dog pack and headed inside. âTrifle, yay.â Then she paused. âOh, Iâm sorry, sir,â she said, looking back. âI meanâ¦ William. Do you want your mango trifle in your room? Do you want me to take you straight there?â

âUmâ¦no,â he said weakly.

âThatâs a shame,â she said. âIf youâre sitting at the kitchen table youâll want seconds. Thereâs less for us that way, but if youâre sureâ¦ Lead the way, Grandma. Letâs go.â

CHAPTER THREE

AN HOUR later, fortified with a supper of huge ham sandwiches and a mango trifle which seemed to have stunned William, they were in the car again, heading for Mickeyâs. It was almost eleven but Meg knew enough of Mickey to believe heâd still be awake, Net surfing.

This was the only option for her boss to contact home. It had to work.

Who did he have waiting for him in New York? He wasnât saying, and she wasnât asking. They drove in silence.

She pulled up outside a farmhouse a lot less startling than Lettyâs. Instead of knocking, though, while William watched from the car, she tossed gravel at the lit end window.

Mickey hauled up the window. âBruce?â

That one word deflected her thoughts from her own problems. Once upon a time, Mickey would have expected Scott, Meg thought bleakly. The kids were the same age and they lived barely two miles apart. Four years ago, their bikes had practically created a rut in the road between.

But the rut had long been repaired. Tonight Scott had been too tired to come with them. He was always tired. Heâd hardly touched his supper. His school work was slipping; he was simply uninterested. There were problems apart from his physical ones, she thought. In the New Year sheâd have to talk to his doctors again about depression.

But how could she sort depression for a kid facing what Scott was facing? How long before he could ride a bike again? He believed he never could.

She hadnât accepted it, though. Sheâd fight it every inch of the way. But that meant staying employed so she could pay the bills. It also meant being nice to her boss over Christmas, or as nice as she could. Which meant throwing stones at a neighbourâs window three days before Christmas.

âBruce?â Mickey called again and she hauled her attention

back to here and now. âItâs Meg,â she called to the kid at the window.

âMeg?â Mickey sounded pleased, and she liked that. She liked coming home. She liked it that every person in the tiny shopping town of Tandaroit East knew her, and she could go into every house in the district and find people she knew.

âThe phones are out and I have a guest here who needs to contact New York,â she said. âScottyâ¦Scott said you have Skype.â

âHey, I do,â Mickey said, sounding inordinately pleased. âIâve never used it for New York, though. I donât know anyone there.â

âWould it be all right if Mr McMaster used it?â

âWilliam,â said William.

âHi, Will.â Mickey was clearly delighted to have company.

âAre your parents asleep?â Meg asked.

âDad is. Heâs gotta milk at five. But Mumâs making mince pies. You want me to tell her youâre here?â

âYes, please,â Meg said thankfully. âI donât want to be caught creeping round the place at night without your parents knowing.â

âYeah,â Mickey said in a laughing voice that said such an action had indeed been indulged in on more than one occasion before now.

And Meg thought sadly of how much of a normal kidâs life Scotty was missing.

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So her boss used Skype while Meg helped Mickeyâs mum scoop mincemeat into pastry shells. Jenny wasnât much older than Meg, but while Meg had gone to university and then to a career, Jenny had married her childhood sweetheart at seventeen and had Mickey nine months later.

She could have done the same, Meg thought, feeling nostalgic and a bit jealous as she took in the cosy farm kitchen, the muddle of Christmas baking, the detritus of a farming family, with twin girls of nine as well as Mickey.

âThis place looks gorgeous,â Meg said, sitting on an ancient kitchen chair and scooping mincemeat.

âNope,â Jenny said and grinned. âGorgeous is whatâs up in Mickeyâs room right now.â Jenny had been introduced before Mickey had taken William off to link him with the other side of the world, and Meg could see her friend adding two and two and making seventeen.

âYou mean my boss.â

âI mean the man youâve brought home for Christmas. Yum. Iâve seen him in the gossip rags and heâs even more gorgeous in the flesh. Heâs a squillionaire. Heâs your boss. And youâve got him for Christmas.â

âYou can have him if you want him,â Meg said morosely. âHe might be happier here. You have a computer.â

âYeah, and I have twins and Ianâs extended family arriving tomorrow to stay for a week. Thereâll be eight kids in the house. Heaven help us.â But she was smiling as she said it and Meg thought, even though she had never understood Jennyâs decision to marry and make a home so early, maybeâ¦ just maybe it made sense.

âYouâre not getting clucky,â Jenny demanded, following her gaze, and Meg realised she was staring at a pile of paper chains at the far end of the table. She remembered making them as a kid.

âI have spare paper,â Jenny said happily. âYou can help your boss make paper chains. Very bonding.â

âVery funny.â

âNo, I think itâs lovely,â Jenny said, getting serious. âTo have him here for Christmasâ¦ Oooh, Meg. But does he have a girlfriend?â

âI have no idea.â

âNo idea?â

âWell, Iâm his PA and I havenât been told to send flowers to anyone lately. But he was desperate to use the phone.â

âSo whoâs he ringing?â

âI have no idea.â

âIâll ask Mickey.â

But Mickey, who wandered into the kitchen two minutes later, was no help at all.

âYeah, heâs talking but I put my headset on and left him to it. Nah, I didnât hear who to. Mum, you reckon itâs too late to put another CD on my Christmas list? Iâve just found this sick new

bandâ¦â

âForget it,â his mother said. âSanta asked for a list a month ago and you couldnât think of anything except a farm bike, which you know we canât afford. So what are you giving William for Christmas, Meg, love?â

Uh-oh. Here was yet another problem she hadnât thought through.

On Christmas morning she sat under the Christmas tree and opened presents. Lots of presents.

Megâs mother had always believed inâ¦excess. Sheâd loved Christmas with a passion and Meg had still been getting a Santa stocking at twenty-five.

The next year, with her parents dead, Meg had over-compensated, and so had Letty and, to their delight, so did Scott. Heâd plundered his piggy bank and asked the nurses to help him.

Theyâd had a silly, over-the-top Christmas in Scottyâs hospital ward, and the tradition had thus continued.

So Megâs last minute Christmas spree had filled her baggage with gifts but there wasnât a lot she could recycle for William.

âHe has everything,â she said, feeling hopeless.

âHe hasnât got Skype,â Mickey said.

âHe will next week when he goes back to New York.â

âSo buy him a satellite dish for the weekend,â Mickey said cheerfully. âThen Scotty can use it after he leaves.â

Right. With what?

âThatâs just a bit more money than I had in mind to spend,â she retorted and Mickey screwed up his nose and sloped off to watch television in the other room. Grown-up problems. Not his.

âSo howâs the debt reduction going?â Jenny asked. Jenny had been one of the many whoâd come to Megâs aid after the crash. She knew of Megâs debt. Scottâs medical expenses were colossal, and on top of that theyâd had to keep the farm going when there was no one to run it.

âItâs okay,â she told her friend. As long as Iâm not sacked, she added under her breath. But Iâm probably sacked, so letâs not go there.

âSo itâs just a present for Mr Sexy-Eyes. Can you knit?â

âNo!â

âSo thatâs home-made socks out of the question. Leaves only aftershave,â Jenny said. âIan gets some every year from his

Aunty Merle, only Merle hasnât noticed that Ianâs had a full beard for twenty years now. Iâm happy to donate a gallon or six.â

âI suspect he uses his own.â

âI guess he would,â Jenny said, sliding one batch of mince pies out of the oven and another in. âSo thereâs nothing in the world he needs.â

âExcept a plane out of here.â

âOut of your control, love,â Jenny said. âItâll have to be aftershave.â She glanced up at the ceiling. âIâd so love to be a fly on the wall, wouldnât you? I wonder who heâs talking to?â

âItâs not my business,â Meg said, a bit too primly, and Jenny laughed.

âYou mean the walls are too thick and thereâs no way we can find out. Letâs face it, youâre interested, and why not? Heâs the most eligible man on the planet, as well as the most gorgeous. As well as that, heâs your house guest for three days. You have him trapped. Meg darling, if you donât try and get him interestedâseriously interestedâyou have rocks in your head.â

âFinished,â Williamâs voice growled from the door and they both jumped and Meg did her blushing thing again. That was twice now. All I want for Christmas is my dignity, she thought desperately, as Jenny stifled laughter.

âDidâ¦did you get onto who you wanted?â she managed, wondering how pink her face was.

âYes, thank you.â How much had he heard? she thought. *The most eligible man on the planetâ¦* Andâ¦ *You have him trappedâ¦* If he thoughtâ¦

âWho did you need to talk to?â Jenny asked innocently and offered him a plate of mince pies.

âFriends,â he said shortly, his face expressionless. Meg knew that expression. It meant the McMaster displeasure was about to wreak consequences. There wasnât a lot of wreaking he could do right now, though, except wave away the mince pie plate as if it was poison.

âEat my mince pies or Iâll be offended for ever,â Jenny said. âThe price of my Internet cafÃ© is a compliment for the cook.â

And he really was trapped, Meg thought. He was forced not to snap; he was forced even to be pleasant.

So he ate and he somehow managed to tell Jenny her mince

pies were excellent, while Meg tried to get her face in order, and she almost managed it but then Jenny, dog at a bone, refusing to be deflected, said, âSo are you going to tell us who this friend is whoâs awake at six oâclock in the morning in New York?â and Meg blushed all over again.

âJenny, he doesnât have to answer.â

âNo, but Iâm interested.â

âThank you very much for your Internet use,â William said, clipped, tight and angry. He tugged his wallet out and laid a note on the kitchen table. A note so large it made Jenny gasp.

âWhat do you think youâre doing?â

âPaying,â he said.

âPut it away,â Jenny said, angry to match now. âThereâs no need for that.â

âJennyâs my friend,â Meg said. âSheâd never charge.â

âSheâs not *my* friend.â

Whoa. Line overstepped. She was home for Christmas and there were some things which she would not put up with. Hurting Jenny was one of them.

âShe is because she let you use the Internet when she didnât have to. Without thought of payment. You wonât have to walk back to the station. Iâll drive you,â she snapped. âJenny, do you have a sleeping bag I can borrow? And a water bottle? Give him a couple more of those mince pies so he wonât starve.â

âHey, I wasnât that offended,â Jenny said, her flash of hurt disappearing and being replaced by her customary laughter. She took Williamâs money and tucked it back into his suit pocket. âIt was very nice of him to offer.â

âIt was not nice,â Meg said, glowering. âHe was being snarky.â

âSnarky?â William said.

âDonât look at me like Iâm speaking some other language,â Meg retorted. âYou know what snarky is. Jenny. Sleeping bag.â

âYouâre not serious,â Jenny said. âIf you are, he can sleep here.â

âHeâs not your friend. He just said so.â

âHe wasnât serious.â

âI was,â William said. âBut Iâm having second thoughts.â

âYou know, I think thatâs wise,â Jenny said, and grinned again and waggled her finger at the pair of them. âBirds in their

little nest agreeâ¦â

âJenny!â

âGo on, get out of here, the two of you,â Jenny said cheerfully. âTake him home, Meg, and donât even think of going via the station. Can you just see the headlines? Tomorrowâs express train thundering through Tandaroit Station, with William McMaster sleeping off the effect of too many mince pies on a deserted platform? So be nice to her, William, and if you can possibly manage it, tell her who it is that you contacted tonight. Sheâs dying to know, even if it isnât her business.â

She raised floury hands and shooed them out into the hall, out of the front door. She banged it shut after them, and then tugged it open again. An afterthought had just occurred.

âItâs the season for peace on earth and goodwill to all men,â she called after them. âSo donât leave him on the railway station.â

Â

They drove home in silence. Meg was too embarrassed to say anything. William simplyâ¦didnât.

She pulled up outside the house and made to get out, but Williamâs hand came down onto her arm, making her pause.

âIâm sorry,â he said. âBut I donât take kindly to questions.â

âThatâs your right. But you will be nice to my family and to my friends.â

âI will be nice to your family and to your friends,â he repeated. âTell me about Scott.â

âSorry?â

âIâve employed you for three years. Iâve never asked about your family.

âI donât take kindly to questions,â she intoned and he grimaced.

âThatâs your right,â he conceded. âOf course youâre not obligated to tell me.â

âAs youâre not obligated to tell me who you just telephoned.â She relented then, sighed and put up her hands in mock surrender. âNo. Donât tell me. Itâs Jenny who wanted to know that one, not me.â And how about that for a barefaced lie? she thought, but some lies were almost compulsory.

But Williamâs question still hung, unanswered, and he wasnât taking it back.

She glanced at the house. Apart from the Christmas decorations it was all in darkness. Letty and Scott would be long asleep. Even the dogs hadnât stirred on their return. Theyâd be sleeping in a huge huddle at the end of Scottâs bed, she knew. Turps and Roger would be on the bed itselfâScott had trained them to lie still so he could use them as a rest for his brace. The others would be on the floor, as close as they could get.

She loved Scotty so much it hurt. It hurt so much she wanted to cry. And, all at once, it was easy to answer Williamâs question. She wanted to talk.

âScottyâs my half-brother,â she said, staring ahead into the darkness. Speaking almost to herself. âMy mum was a single mumâshe had me early and she raised me the hard way, with no parental support. Then, when I was nine, she met Scottâs dad. Alex was a farmer, a fair bit older than she was. Mum was selling second-hand clothes at a market and Alex had come to town to check out some new, innovative water pump. He never bought the pump but he took one look at Mum and he fell hard.â

âLove at first sight,â William said, and he sounded a bit derisive. Meg glared at him. He was on shaky ground. Derision wasnât something she was putting up with tonight.

And apparently he realised it. âSorry,â he said. âSorry, sorry. Love at first sight. It happens.â

âSo it does,â she said and glared at him a bit longer until she was sure he was remembering the railway station and the water bottle and the express train thundering through, crowded with people with cameras.

âSo it did,â she reiterated as he attempted to look apologeticânot a good fit for W S McMaster but it was a start. Her glare faded. âI remember the weekend Alex invited us here. He was a great big dairy farmer, in his forties. He hardly talked. That was okay. Mum was a talker, and I remember he just kept looking at Mum like she was some sort of magic. And then I met Letty and Letty was my magic. We arrived on the Friday night and Mum and Alex couldnât take their eyes off each other all weekend, and on Sunday Letty said âcall me Grandma.â It was like weâd come home. We had come home. Alex took us back to

Melbourne and we threw our things into the back of his truck and we headed back here and stayed. Alex married Mum a month later. I was a flower girl. Letty made me the most gorgeous dress. We were so happy, and then five years later Scotty was born and it was perfect.â

âNothingâs perfect,â William said, as if he couldnât help himself, and she shook her head in disgust.

âAnd thereâs no such thing as love at first sight? Donât mess with my fairy tales, Mr McMaster. It was love at first sight and it was perfect for sixteen whole years. Sure, the farmâs not big and we struggled a bit, but Mum still did markets and everyone helped. I was good at school and we knew there was no way the farm would support Scotty and meâor even one of usâbut I was really happy going to university. I missed it more when I got a full-time job, but I was still pretty happy, having this place here as my backstop. And then four years ago a truck came round a bend on the wrong side of the road and it all crumpled to nothing.â

Silence.

âIâm so sorry,â he said at last.

âYeah,â she said grimly. âIt makes you realise that when you have the fairy tale you hang on and you appreciate it every single moment. Just like thatâ¦â She shook her head, shaking away nightmares. âAnyway, Mum and Alex were killed instantly. Scotty was eleven. He was in the back seat. He just brokeâ¦everything. For months we thought heâd be a paraplegic, but he had so much grit. He *has* so much grit. Heâs fought and fought. For ages neighbours kept the farm going for us. We thought weâd have to sell but then Letty and I figured maybe we could keep it. If we use my salary to augment the income, we can just get by. Itâs where Scottyâs happy. Itâs where Lettyâs happy.â

âAnd your job with meâ¦â

âSee, thereâs the fairy tale again,â she said and smiled, but he didnât smile back. He looked intent, as if trying to see meaning behind her words. It disconcerted her, but no matter, she had to keep going. âI thought Iâd get a job in Curalo and commute the twenty miles,â she told him, âbut then along came your advertisement and itâs been fabulous. We have a lady who

comes and milks for us while Iâm not here. Lettyâs still active. Weâve coped.â

âSo if I sack youâ¦â

Her smile faded. âThenâ¦â

âThen the fairy tale ends again?â

âItâs not as bad as that,â she said and tilted her chin. âWeâll manage.â

âI wonât sack you.â

âI donât need sympathy.â

âIâm not offering it. Weâll put this behind us as an unfortunate aberrationâ¦â

âOn my part.â

âOn your part,â he agreed gravely. âItâs been a sad hiccup in your normally exemplary efficiency. Weâll get this weekend behind us and then go back to where we were. Youâre normally an extremely competent employee.â

âGee, thanks,â she said before she could stop herself. Who was being snarky now?

âIf thatâs sarcasmâ¦â

âNo, Iâm overwhelmed,â she said. âHonestly I am.â She had to get herself under control here. Meek, she told herself. Do meek.

âI donât give compliments that arenât deserved,â he said stiffly and she thoughtâwhat am I doing, joshing with a guy who controls my life? But there was something about this day, or this night, this time, this seasonâmaybe even it was just that Santa was still waggling dumbly overheadâthat made her refuse to treat this as normal. She wasnât going back to being Miss Jardine; not just yet.

âYou know you donât have to simply âget this weekend behind us,ââ she said cautiously. âYou could enjoy it.â

âIâm hardly in a position to enjoy it.â

âBecause you donât have the phone or the Internet?â

âBecause Iâm right out of my comfort zone,â he said honestly. âAnd I want to be back in New York.â

âAnd I want my parents back,â she retorted. âBut that doesnât stop me enjoying what I have. The here and now.â

âThatâs very commendable.â

âIt is, isnât it,â she said evenly. âIn fact, if Iâm not mistaken,

my boss just commended me. He said I was normally an extremely competent employee. So while Iâm ahead I might just stop.â She swung herself out of the car and waited for him to do likewise. âI have an early start, Mr McMaster, so I need to go to bed.â

âWhy do you have an early start?â

âI milk cows,â she said, heading for the back door. âIf you canât sleep and run out of work, then youâre welcome to join me at dawn. Instead of a gym workout. If I were you, though, I wouldnât wear a suit.â And she walked into the house and left him to followâif he wanted.

What choice did he have?

None at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

He woke to the sound of cows. Many cows. The window of his attic bedroom was open and the not-so-gentle lowing was filling the room. The old, comfortable bed, the faded furnishings and the unaccustomed sounds were so different from his normal environment that he struggled to take it in.

But he got it soon enough. He was trapped for Christmas. On Megâs farm.

Megâ¦

In the pre-dawn light the name felt strange, almost dangerous. He linked his hands loosely behind his head and stared upward, trying to assimilate how he was feeling. The planked ceiling ran up to a peak. Heâd be right underneath Santaâs sleigh, he thought, and that seemed so unnerving he unlinked his hands and swung himself straight out of bed.

He didnât intend to lie in bed and think about Santa. About what heâd promised. About what he was missing in New York.

Nor did he intend to lie in bed and think about Meg.

Miss Jardine.

Meg, he thought. The name suited her.

So why was Lettyâs order to use her name unsettling?

He knew why. As an adolescent blessed with enough insight to think about emotions, heâd struggled with reasons. Heâd even wondered if one of the therapists his mother used might give him answers. But finally heâd worked it out himself. This had been a lesson taught early to a child by a jealous, vindictive mother, who believed employees and friends were to be strictly differentiated.

âTheyâll take advantageâ¦â

It was a savage line, said with spite, and the memory of it still had the power to make him flinch.

Unsettled, he crossed to the attic window and peered below. It was barely daybreak; the sun wasnât yet over the horizon and the farm looked grey-green, barely lit from the night before. He

could see the roof of what must be the dairy, and cows clustering beyond. A couple of dogs were fussing around them, but the cows were uninterested. The cows looked as if they knew what they were about, and the dogs were simply demonstrating their role.

A role other than licking Meg.

Meg. There it was again. The word.

âTheyâll take advantageâ¦â

Heâd been seven. His parents had been away, for who knew how long? It never seemed to matter because the house was much more fun with them gone. It was summer. School was out and Ros, their cook, had been teaching him to make pancakes. But sheâd turned her back and heâd tried to flip a pancake before it was ready. The hot batter had oozed from the spatula and onto his hand.

Hannah, his nanny, had come running. Sheâd held him tight, rocking him, while Ros rushed to apply salve.

âThere, baby, itâll be fine, see, Ros has ice and ointment all ready. Let Hannah see.â

His parents had walked in as theyâd hugged him.

Maybe he hadnât reacted fast enough. He was shocked and his hand hurt, so instead of rushing to greet them with the pleasure heâd already begun to act instead of feel, heâd simply clung harder to his Hannah.

âWhat is this?â his mother had demanded with deep displeasure, and heâd sobbed then, with fright as well as pain. Already he knew that voice. âWilliam, stop that appalling crying and get over here. You do not get close to servants.â

âTheyâre not servants,â heâd managed. âTheyâre Hannah and Ros.â

His motherâs eyes had narrowed at that, and heâd been sent to his room without even salve on his hand.

Who knew where Hannah and Ros were now? Theyâd been given notice on the spot. He needed to learn independence, his mother had decreed, and he still remembered the sneer.

His next nanny had been nice enough, but heâd learned. His new nanny was Miss Carmichael. He did not get close.

Soon after that heâd been sent to boarding school. His parents had split and from then on his holidays had been spent with his

grandparents. The only care he had there was from more servantsâthough eventually his grandfather realised he had a head for figures. That had resulted in a tinge of interest. William was deemed the new head of the McMaster Empire.

So there he had it, he thought ruefully, his one family use. His grandfather knew heâd make a good businessman and that was the extent of his importance. It was no wonder he was emotionally screwed.

He should be able to get over itâhis dysfunctional familyâtheir fierce focus on social hierarchy and fortuneâtheir petty squabbles and personal vindictivenessâtheir total lack of sense of family. But how to get over a lifetime of dysfunction? Even now, he didnât really understand what family love or life was. Heâd an inkling of it through friends and associates. At times he even envied it, but to try and achieve itâ¦No.

Heâd learned not to need it. He couldnât need something he didnât understand and the last thing he wanted was to hurt another human as his extended family had hurt each other. How could he undo so many years of family malice? He couldnât.

He told no one any lies about himself. The women he dated used his social cachet as pay-off, and that was fine by him.

And the kids? Pip and Ned? He was certainly fond of them, as fond as he ever allowed himself to be. But they called him Mr McMaster and he knew that soon heâd disappear from their lives as well. That was the way things had to be. Like now. He couldnât even be there for them at Christmas. A broken promise, like so many heâd been given as a childâ¦

A whistle split the air, so loud it hauled him out of his reverie. Maybe that was just as well. There was little to be gained by trying to change at this stage of his life, and maybe a lot to lose. He shrugged, mocking something that was part and parcel of how he faced the worldâand then he tried to figure who was whistling.

Meg had said sheâd be helping with the milking. Who else was down there?

There was only one way to find out.

He checked his watch. It was five-thirty.

Early, even by his standards.

Whoever was down there knew how to work.

W S McMaster could be forgotten here. She was perfectly, gloriously happy. She was home.

Meg stomped across the baked dirt and whooshed her next cow into the bail. Friesian 87 plodded forward with resigned equanimity.

âThatâs Topsy,â Kerrie said. âHer milk productionâs gone up twelve per cent this year. Youâre ace, arenât you, girl?â

âI thought Letty decided we should stop naming them.â

âThat was only when she had to get rid of half the herd. It broke her heart. Now your incomeâs so good sheâs decided we can name them again. She started with Millicent, and now sheâs moving onto the whole herd.â

Uh-oh.

âItâs not so stable as you might think,â she said cautiously.

Kerrie released her cow and stretched and glanced across into the vat room, where her three little girls were playing in a makeshift playpen. âWe take one day at a time,â she said. âWe all know that.â

Maybe everyone did, Meg thought as she washed teats and attached cups. Last year Kerrieâs husband had maxed out their credit cards and taken off with a girl half his age, leaving Kerrie with three babies under four. Milking here was now her sole income.

Kerrieâs income was thus dependent on Megâs income. On Megâs job.

William had said he wouldnât fire her. She had to believe him. But first they had to get through Christmas.

Weâll put this behind us as an unfortunate aberrationâ¦

Christmas. An aberration.

That wasnât what heâd meant, but it was how it seemed.

What was he intending to do with himself for the next three days?

âCan I help?â

She didnât have to show she was startled. The cows did it for her, backing away in alarm at this unfamiliar person in the yard. The cow Kerrie was ushering in backed right out again before Kerrie could stop her, and Kerrie swore and headed after her.

âYou need to move,â Meg said swiftly. âYouâre scaring the

cows.â

He was in his gym gear. Black and white designer stuff with crisp white designer trainers. Very neat.

The cows werenât appreciating it.

He backed into the vat room, where the playpen was set up. The oldest of the little girls cried out in alarm and he backed out of there too.

Meg found herself smiling. Her boss, in charge of his world. Or not.

âGo back to bed,â she advised. âItâs early.â

âI donât like my PA working before me. Is there something I can do?â

âReally?â

âReally.â

Goodness. âHow are you at washing udders?â she asked, stunned.

âI learned it at kindergarten,â he said promptly and she found herself chuckling. Heâd woken up on the right side of the bed, then. Maybe this could work.

âIf youâre seriousâ¦â

âIâm serious.â

âThe cows donât like gym gear.â

âYou think I should go back and put on one of my suits?â

âUmâ¦no.â She chuckled and saw a flare of surprise in his eyes. Maybe she didnât chuckle around him enough.

Maybe she didnât chuckle at all.

âKerrieâs brother helps out here occasionally when the kids are sick,â she said. âRonâs around your size. His overalls and gumboots are in the vat room.â

âGumboots?â

âWellingtons,â Kerrie said, entranced.

âThis is Kerrie,â Meg said. âKerrie, this is William.â

âYour boss?â Kerrie asked.

âNot right this minute heâs not,â she said firmly. âNow heâs offering to be a worker. You want to use Ronâs gear? The cows will settle once you look familiar.â She pointed to the vat room.

âThereâs babies in there,â William said nervously, and both women burst out laughing.

âIf youâre going to give me a hard timeâ¦â William said but, to Megâs amazement, he was smiling.

âNah, youâre free labour,â Meg said, smiling right back. âKerrie, youâre responsible for keeping Mr McMaster free of all babies. Get changed and come out and weâll introduce you to Cows One to a Hundred.

âOnly now they all have names,â Kerrie reminded her. âIâll teach you.â

âTeach us both,â Meg said. âIt seems we both need to get used to names.â

Â

By the time they finished, the sun was already spreading warmth, promising a hot day to come. Meg set William to sluicing the dairy while she did who knew what with the equipment in the vat room. Sluicing was, William found, a curiously satisfying job, controlling a hose with enough water power to drive the mess off the ramp and into the drains. It was a manly sort of hose, he decided, and he set about enjoying himself.

Kerrie collected her kids and made to leave. âIâll see you tonight,â she called to Meg and he thought suddenly, she looks tired.

Three kids, so smallâ¦ What was she doing, milking twice a day?

âAre you milking over Christmas?â he asked, and Kerrie nodded.

âLetty and I milk twice a day. When Megâs here Letty gets time off. She needs it.â

âWhen do you get a sleep-in?â he asked and suddenly Meg was outside again, listening.

âWith three babies?â Kerrie asked, as if sleep-ins were unheard of.

âTheir dadâ¦â

âHe did a runner,â Kerrie said, with feigned indifference. âMilking for Megâs the only thing between me and bankruptcy.â

And William glanced over at Meg, caught her urgent, unspoken message and knew it was true.

âSo youâre milking morning and night all over Christmas.â

âI like it,â Kerrie said.

âSo if I said Iâd do it for youâ¦â

Both women drew in their breath. Megâs face went still. She obviously hadnât expected this.

âIf itâs okay with Meg, that is,â he said and swooshed a mess of stuff from the ramp. Swooshing felt excellent.

Meg smiled. He liked it when she smiled. How come he hadnât noticed that smile way before now?

âItâs fine by me,â Meg said, âbutâ¦â

âBut I canât afford it,â Kerrie said, suddenly breathless. âI meanâ¦itâs a lovely offer butâ¦â

âBut nothing,â Meg said, suddenly rock solid, smiling at William as if he was Santa in person. âWilliamâs offering to do it for free. Iâm sure of it. Iâve budgeted for your pay so this is his gift to you. Let the man be magnanimous.â

âMagnanimous?â Kerrie ventured.

âManly,â Meg said, grinning. âThis is a very manly gesture.â

âIf youâre sure,â Kerrie whispered, sounding awed.

âOf course heâs sure,â Meg said, smiling and smiling. âThereâs so much womenâs work to be done over Christmas, and what do the men do? They buy a bottle of perfume at the last minute, if weâre lucky. Even Scotty. Heâs left his Christmas shopping to the last minute and I have to take him to Curalo this morning. Iâll stand outside the shop while he buys me the perfume Iâve told him I like and then Iâll drive him home and thatâs his manly duty done. So hereâs one offering to be truly usefulâ¦â

âWow,â Kerrie said.

âYep, get and go before I change my mind,â William said. âOr before I turn my hose on your boss. Happy Christmas, Kerrie.â He moved his hose so the water arced in a wide semi-circle. How long since heâd done something this hands-on? There was a pile of dried dung beside the fence. He aimed his hose and the dung flew eighteen inches in the air before heading for the drain. Deeply satisfying.

âOh, wow,â Kerrie breathed again, and she abandoned the kids and hugged Meg. Then she eyed Williamâwith cautionâanyone would regard him with caution right nowâbut finally emotion got the better of sense and she darted over the yard and hugged him as well. Then she flew back to her kids and

bustled them into the car and away before anyone had a chance to change their mind.

âHey, that felt good,â Meg said, heading back into the vat room and replacing the dipstick sort of thing she was holding into the slot at the side of the vat. âDid it feel good to you?â

He sent another cowpat into the air. âAbsolutely.â

âIf you knew how much that means to Kerrieâ¦â Then she hesitated. âUmâ¦ Sirâ¦ What are you doing with that hose?â

Sir? Sheâd called him sir. Of course, that was what he was. Wasnât it? But she was looking bemused so he turned his attention back to the hose. It had made a left turn and was now aimed straight into the drain behind the cowâs drinking trough, forcing the contents of the drain up and in.

Uh-oh.

âI guess the drinking trough now needs to be cleaned,â Meg said. âWeâll need to empty it, scrub it, rinse it three times and then fill it up again. We donât want contamination, do we?â

âUmâ¦no,â he said and thought maybe there were a few skills he needed to concentrate on.

The milk tanker arrived just as he finished. The driver climbed from the cab and greeted Meg with delight.

âHey, Meggie.â

âMeggie?â William said softly.

âJust try itâ¦Willie,â she said with a glower that made him grin, and went to meet the driver. William listened in while they caught up. Their talk was all about milk yields and fat content and bacterial levels. Meg sounded as he was accustomed to hearing her, smoothly competent, in charge of her world. But it was such a different world.

They gossiped on while he cleaned the trough and cleaned the yard surely cleaner than it had ever been cleaned before. Then the driver started emptying the vats and Meg strode over and turned his hose off. He felt bereft.

âI was just getting good,â he said sadly.

âYou can do it again tonight,â she said and he started winding the hose around the reel by hand. She leaned over and grabbed the wheel and started turning. She was showing him up here.

But there was something else happening. The angelâ¦

Her little Christmas angel was still hanging around her neck, and it was sliding down her breasts. He noticed.

She was wearing grungy old overalls, sort of mud-brown. She was wearingâ¦what had she called them? Gumboots. Her hair was pulled back with an elastic band and she had mud smeared down the side of her face.

The top three buttons of her overalls were undone. Her angel was nestling on the soft swell of her breasts.

Lucky angel.

Why had it taken him until now to realise how beautiful she was?

âEarth to William,â she said and he blinked and grabbed the wheel and started turning it himself, so fast the hose slipped off and he had to stop and start again.

Maybe this wasnât a good idea. Maybe he had to get away.

A thoughtâ¦

âYou need perfume?â he asked.

âNo,â she said, bemused.

He didnât think so. Perfume would hardly fit with what she was doing right now. Butâ¦

âBut Scott wants to buy you perfume.â

âHe wants to go Christmas shopping. I promised Iâd take him to Curalo. Thatâs our closest major shopping centreâtwenty miles from here.â

âBut you have things to do here, right?â

âRight,â she said cautiously.

âSo could I take him?â

âYou,â she said, stunned, and he thought about whether he should take personal affront at the thought that she obviously thought himâand the rest of the male speciesâuseless, and then he caught another glimpse of that angel and thought maybe not.

âWould he mind if I took him?â he asked. âI could find an Internet place in town and do my contactingâkill two birds with one stone.â

âThatâd be fantastic,â she breathed. âCraig here says we should have signed the contract for our milk quota before Christmas. The managerâs still at work, so Craig says I can get a lift back in with him. He can bring me back when he does the next farm. But then I promised Letty Iâd help do the pudding. I

need to check on Millicent. I need to see to the water troughs. Iâm having trouble making everything fit.â

âSo itâs a good idea?â

âItâs a fabulous idea,â she said admiringly. Her eyes were twinklingâ¦ Maybe she was manipulating him and it was such an odd experienceâ¦

People didnât manipulate him. Had she just manipulated him?

Who knew? This was one clever woman.

âWould you be confident driving Lettyâs car?â she said. âI know you can drive on our side of the road.â More admiration?

âYes, butâ¦â

âScotty would love to go with you. Christmas shopping with his sister, or go Christmas shopping with a guy, someone who wonât make him wait outside lingerie shops? What a choice.â

âYou donât!â

âHeâs always scared I might.â She hesitated, and the laughter died. âIâ¦ heâs had a tough time. Heâd enjoy going shopping with you rather than with me.â

âHis legâ¦â

She glanced across at Craig but Craig was bending down to pat Killer and was obviously not in too great a rush. She turned back to William and he realised he was being assessed. She held his gaze for a long moment and then gave a decisive little nod. Whatever test thereâd been, it seemed heâd passed. Manipulation was past. It was time for honesty.

âScottâs been through hell and back,â she said bluntly. âHis leg was so badly smashed they had to put in a rod instead of bone. It healed but then they had to insert another rod because he grew. That got infected.â She swallowed. âHe almost died. Again. The leg still hasnât completely healed but it will and heâs okay to get around. Heâs really good on crutches. If you couldâ¦just do what he wants. And if you can think of anything heâd like, Iâd appreciate that too. Iâve bought him so many computer games he surely must be over them but Iâm hopeless at thinking of what a teenage boy wants. Heâs so restrictedâbut he needs a manly present.â

Her frankness was working as manipulation never could. But he could do this. He even puffed his chest a little. âSo youâd like

me to take your kid brother Christmas shopping for manly presents? I can do that.â

âOoh, youâre not my boss, youâre my hero,â she said and before, he could begin to guess what she intended, she stood on tiptoe and kissed him. It was a feather kiss, almost a mockery, but not quite. It was a kiss of laughter and of sudden friendship, and why it had the capacity to make him feelâ¦

How did it make him feel?

He didnât know and it was too late to find out. Craig was replacing his hoses and yelling, âAre you coming or not?â

âIâm coming,â she called. âIâll just go lose my overalls and check with Scott. But this is a great idea. My milkingâs sorted, my brother will be happy and I have a superhero in the dairy. What more could a girl want?â

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It took Meg an hour to get to the factory and back, by which time William and Scott had been gone for an hour as well. Which left Meg back at home, with no way of knowing when theyâd get back.

She was worrying about her brother. She was also worrying about why sheâd kissed her boss. It had been an impulsive gesture, the sort sheâd make to anyone whoâd done her a big favour, but somehowâ¦it seemed more.

She couldnât think of kissing her boss. That made her feel weird. She went back to worrying about Scott.

âYouâre worrying heâs taken him back to New York?â Letty demanded as she caught Meg looking out of the window for maybe the twentieth time.

âHe canât. There are no planes.â

âYouâve worked for the man for three years. Donât you trust him?â

âOf course I do.â

âThen why worry? Two hours is hardly time to Christmas shop.â But then she hesitated. âOh, but wait. These are guys. Half an hour there, half an hour back, five minutes at the perfume counterâyep, they should be back by now.â She grinned. âBut maybe theyâre doing some bonding. He misses his father, does Scotty. Pass the raisins.â

âYou want me to mix the ingredients?â

âI handed you the bowl five minutes agoâso you could look at it?â

Whoops. âSorry.â She applied herself to her creaming. âWhy didnât you do this before?â she asked. âArenât puddings supposed to have been made a month ago?â

âYou didnât get any time off and I was milking. Iâm not getting any younger. But, back to your young manâ¦â

âMy *boss*.â

âHe doesnât seem to mind hard work.â

âYou say that like itâs a compliment. Heâs addicted to work.â

âPlus heâs really cute,â Letty said and eyed Meg sideways.

âHeâs my boss. I hadnât noticed.â

âRight,â Letty said dryly.

Right?

So, okay she had noticed. What normal warm-blooded woman wouldnât notice W S McMaster?

But what use was there in noticing? For the three years sheâd worked for him their relationship had been totally businesslike. Her boss worked far too hard for it to be anything else. He never noticed *her*, she thought. She was just one of his four PAs.

But sometimesâ¦ Sometimes when theyâd been on a trip together, when theyâd been working late, when sheâd suddenly been a little too close, maybe even a little too familiar as tiredness crept in at the edges, sheâd thought he made a conscious decision not to notice her, as if there were some barrier he couldnât cross.

As, of course, there was. He was her employer.

He was a billionaire.

She mixed the ingredients with her hands, letting the warmth of her hands meld the mixture. She was still staring out of the kitchen window, but she was no longer looking for the absent Scott and William. She was thinking of William as heâd been this morning. Mucking round with his hose. Enjoying himself.

Sheâd kissed him.

It had been nothing but a silly gesture, she told herself. It meant nothing.

Only that wasnât quite true. Meg Jardine had kissed William McMaster. The lines between boss and secretary had blurred.

Leading where?

âYou think that might be creamed enough?â Letty demanded and she looked down into the bowl and thought yep, it was getting so warm it was starting to melt.

There was an analogy somewhere here. Meltingâ¦

âYou want me to chop some nuts?â she managed and Letty grinned some more and handed them over.

âGo right ahead. A girlâs gotta vent her spleen on something. Youâre wondering how much perfume those boys are intending to buy, or are you wondering something else entirely?â

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY didnât appear for lunch and an hour later Meg was really starting to worry. âIâll take the tractor over to Jennyâs and phone him from there,â she muttered. âThey should be back.â

âYouâll do no such thing,â Letty told her. âTheyâll have found a football game or gone to the movies or chanced on something really interesting that only boys can understand. You didnât tell them a get-home-by time, for which Iâm grateful because itâs time we stopped mollycoddling our Scotty. Our Scott.â Then she spoiled it by glancing at the clock. âBut I hope Willâs fed him. And he didnât take any painkillers. If his legâs hurtingâ¦â

âSee,â Meg retorted and they both smiled, shamefaced.

âShortbread next,â Letty declared, so they made a batch, and then another, and they were almost desperate enough to start a third when finally the car turned into the drive. Meg just happened to be looking out of the window when it did.

âWhat on earth have they got on behind?â she demanded, heading for the door.

The dogs were flying down from the veranda. Meg managed to stroll out with what she hoped was a little more dignity.

âDonât say we were worried,â Letty hissed beside her and she agreed entirely. They hadnât been worried at all.

What did they have behind the car?

A trailer. A really large trailer. And on the trailerâ¦

âTheyâve bought a car,â she muttered in amazement. Orâ¦two cars?

âSo much for perfume,â Letty muttered. âThis is never going to fit into a stocking.â

âCome and see, come and see.â Scott was out of the car, shouting his excitement, and the dogs were barking hysterically in response. William emerged from the driverâs side, leaned back on the car door and crossed his armsâa genie whoâd produced

magic and was now expecting appreciation. He was wearing jeans and a short-sleeved open-topped shirt. He lookedâ¦great. He must have stopped at a clothes shop, Meg thought, and then she thought *I kissed him*âand then Scottâs excitement tugged her attention back to what was on the trailer

At the front of the trailer was a Mini Minor, the kind that had been almost the coolest car on the planet back in the seventies. Though maybe it hadnât been quite as cool as the Volkswagen Combi.

Umâ¦what was she thinking? She hadnât even been born in the seventies. This Mini, however, looked as if it had been. It was truly derelict. The little red and rust-red car had no wheels, no glass in its front windscreen and its hood was missing. What looked like grass was sprouting from where the engine should be.

And tied on behind was part of another Mini, in even worse repair. Instead of suffering from neglect, this one looked as if it had been smashed from behind. The back had been squashed almost to the front.

There was also a pile of assorted bits tied on top, meaning the trailer looked like a mini wreckerâs yard.

âItâs Williamâs Christmas present to us all,â Scott shouted and her boss beamed and she thought againâhe looks great. Denim made him look *so-o-o-o* sexyâbut somehow she managed to give her hormones a mental slap and ventured off the veranda to see.

Williamâs Christmas present to us allâ¦

âWe saw a sign just out of town.â Despite his bad leg, Scott was practically jigging his excitement. âIt was in a paddock and it said For Sale. And parts as well. The guy restores Minis but his wifeâs put her foot down. He has three finished Minis in his garage and two more to restore and his wife says the rest have to go. So he sold us this. Two carsâll make one. He says thereâs enough here to make a complete one. He reckons if I start now, by the time I get my licence Iâll have it on the road. If I get it going before then, I can practice in the paddocks. I can phone him any time I want, and if Iâm really stuck heâs even offered to come out here to help.â

âHe really will,â William said, still smiling. âThis wonât be any work for either of you. I promise.â His lovely, lazy smile lit

his face and Meg thought frantically sheâd have to give those hormones another slap.

âI have faith,â he went on. âThisâll mean eventually the farm has two cars. By the way, we also went to the motor place in Curalo and bought bits for your wagon, Letty. Your exhaust pipe has to be replaced and the silencer and so does the carburettor. If itâs okay with you, I might make a start this afternoon.â

âYouâ¦â Meg said, dazed.

âI can fix cars,â he said neutrally. âAnd Scott would like to learn.â

âYou want to fix my car?â Letty said, while Meg simply stood with her mouth open.

âIf itâs okay with you.â

âMarry me,â Letty said, and Scott and William laughedâonly, for some reason, Meg had trouble laughing. The sight of her boss in jeans was disconcerting enough, but she was looking at Scottâs flushed face and his shining happiness and she thought, why hadnât she thought of this?

Scott was practically stranded here on the farm. His bad leg left him isolated. There were so many days when he simply gazed at his computer, in misery and in loneliness.

He now had a car to make. And it was an original Miniâ¦

Mickey would come, she thought, and more. This project would be a magnet. Scottâs mates would come, as they had before the accident.

She was blinking back tears.

âWhatâs wrong?â William demanded, watching her face and clearly confounded.

She sniffed and tried desperately to think of something to say. Something to do rather than kiss him again, which seemed an entirely logical thing to do, but some germ of common sense was holding her back.

âIâ¦I wanted perfume,â she managed, and her little brother stared at her as if she was out of her mind.

âPerfumeâ¦when you could have these!â

âTheyâre not veryâ¦girlie,â she said and somehow she managed to sound doleful and Scott realised she was joking and grinned and hugged her. Which was amazing all by itself. How long since her seriously self-conscious brother had hugged?

âIâll let you drive my car,â he offered, magnanimity at its

finest. âSecond drive after me, the minute I get it going.â

âWhat an offer,â she said and sniffed again and hugged him back and then smiled across at William through unshed tears.

âThank you, Santa,â she said.

âThink nothing of it,â he said in a voice she didnât recognise and then she thought, no, she did know what she was hearing.

Her normally businesslike boss was just a wee bit emotional himself.

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It was time for milking. Letty and Meg milked because, âIâm not interfering with this, even if I have to milk the whole herd,â Letty declared in wonder. Meg could only agree, for kids were arriving from everywhere. It seemed William had detoured past Mickeyâs with their loadââjust to show him,â Scott had told them, and Mickey had sent out word, and before they knew it a team of adolescents was unloading the heap of Mini jumble into the unused shed behind the dairy.

When milking was done Meg checked on Millicentâthe little heifer was thankfully showing no signs of calvingâthen went to investigate. The teenagers were surrounded by Mini parts. William was under Lettyâs car.

âSorry. I know I said Iâd milk, but Letty assured me she could and someone had to superviseâ¦â

Some supervision. All she could see of William was his legs. He was in his borrowed overalls again and his gumboots.

On the other side of the shed teenagers were happily dismantling the wreck, labelling pieces with Lettyâs preserving stickers. She had a bunch of gloriously happy teenagers, and the guy whoâd caused it all to happen was apologising. Meg stared down at her bossâs legs and thought she could totally understand where Lettyâs proposal had come from.

And sheâd never realised until now how sexy a pair of grease-covered legs could be.

âSoâ¦ So where did you learn mechanics?â she managed.

âI told you. Powering up my fatherâs golf cart.â His voice was muffled, but she was aware of an undercurrent of contentment.

âAnd the rest?â

âMy parents were away a lot. They had enough cars to

warrant hiring a mechanic. He taught me.â

âNice guy,â Meg said, deflected from thinking about legsâor almost. She thought instead of gossip sheâd read about this man, about how appalling his parents sounded, how lonely his childhood must have been. âDid this mechanic have a name?â

âMr Himmel.â

âMr Himmel.â She grimaced at the formality. âHe called you Mr McMaster?â

âOf course. Can you pass me under the tension wrench?â

âTension wrench?â

âOn the left with the blue handle.â

âThatâs a tension wrench?â

âAnd you a dairy farmer and all.â

âDairy farmers arenât necessarily mechanics. Plus Iâm a commerce graduate. And a PA.â

âRight, I forgot,â he said, but absently, and she knew his attention was on whatever he needed the tension wrench for.

She watched his legs for a little. His attention was totally on the car.

She watched the boys for a little. Their attention was totally on the car.

Guys doing guy stuff.

Befuddled, she headed back to the dairy, where Letty was sluicing. They cleaned almost in silence but she was aware that Letty kept glancing at her.

âWhat?â Meg said at last, exasperated.

âHeâs lovely.â

âSo why are you looking at me?â She sighed. âAnyway, heâs not lovely. Heâs covered in grease.â

âYou know what I mean.â

âOkay, I do,â she admitted. âBut you know who he is, so you can stop looking at me like you think I should do something about it. Heâs William McMaster, one of the wealthiest men on the planet. Heâs my boss and I have one of the best jobs in the world. If you think Iâm messing with it by thinking heâs lovelyâ¦â

âI suppose it would mess with it,â Letty said. âFalling for the bossâ¦â

âItâd be a disaster.â

âI donât know how you havenât before.â

âBecause Iâve never seen him in overalls before.â

âThey do make a man look sexy,â Letty said thoughtfully. âThat and carrying a grease gun. My Jack was always attached to a grease gun. Mind, once I had to get the grease off his clothes the novelty pretty soon wore off.â She sighed but then she brightened. âBut times have changed. Domestic equality and all that. He could get his own grease off.â

âYouâre seriously suggesting William McMaster could do his own laundry?â Meg even managed a chuckle. The idea merited a chuckle.

As was thinking of those legs, sticking out from under Lettyâs car. As was thinking that William McMaster was sexy.

Legs or not, even if the man carries a grease gun, heâs still my boss, she told herself. A good servant knows her place. Just plaster that message across your box of hormones and leave it there.

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They ate dinner on the run. The boys were in no hurry to go home. At dusk they took off, pack-like, whooping away on their bicycles, and Meg knew theyâd be back first thing in the morning.

This was priceless.

Scott was almost asleep on his feet, but lit up almost as much as the Christmas tree in the sitting room. He fell into bed happier than sheâd seen him for years.

Letty commandeered William to take him over to the shed to show her what he was doing with her car. Meg headed out behind the hay shed. Millicent was still doing little of interest, the small fawn and white cow chewing her cud and gazing placidly out at the fading sunset.

âMind if I share your sunset?â she asked, and Millicent turned her huge bovine eyes on her and seemed to ask a question.

âHeâs only here until Monday. Then itâs back to normal,â Meg said, as if Millicent really was asking the question. Only what was the question? And what was normal?

She hitched herself up on the fence and started sunset-gazing. But she wasnât seeing sunset. âThis is just a hiccup in our lives,â she said out loud. âBut itâs a great hiccup.â

She was under no illusion as to how big a deal this was. Ever since the accident Scottyâs mates had been drifting away. They were nice kids. They included him when they could, but increasingly he was off their radar.

Today theyâd returned and theyâd hated leaving. Here was a project designed to keep kids happy for months, if not years. A project with a working car at the end of itâ¦ A Mini. Theyâd be back and back and back.

And it was all down to William. William of the sexy legs. William of the sexyâ¦everything.

And suddenly, inexplicably, she was tearing up. She sniffed and Millicent pushed her great wet nose under her arm as if in sympathy.

âYeah, youâd know about men,â she retorted. âOf all the dumb blondesâ¦â

âWhoâs a dumb blonde?â

She hadnât heard him approach. He moved like a panther, she thought, startled. He was long and lithe and silent as the night. He leaned against her fence, and she had to hitch along a bit so he could climb up and sit beside her.

âDumb blonde?â he said again.

âMeet Millicent,â she said. âDumb adolescent blonde.â

âThat not a kind thing to say about an obviously sweet cow.â

âSheâs oversexed,â Meg said darkly, struggling not to react to the way his body brushed against hers. There was plenty of room. Why did he need to sit so close?

âReally?â It was Williamâs turn to sound startled.

âReally.â

âSo how do you tell if a cow is oversexed?â

âShe got out of her paddock,â she explained. âNot only did she get out, she got in again. We finally found her in our next door neighbourâs bull paddock. Now sheâs pregnant and sheâs too young to have babies but thatâs what sheâs having, any day now. Lettyâs worried sick.â

âWhatâs to worry about?â

âWe donât know which bull it was.â

âYou donât know which bullâ¦â

âIt could have been one of three.â

âYouâre telling me sheâsâ¦loose?â he demanded, and she

giggled and swayed on her perch and he put a hand out to steady her. He shifted closer and held on around the waist, making sure she was secure. She waited for him to let her goâbut he didnât.

âSo tell me all,â he demanded, and she thought, do you know what the feel of your arm around my waist is doing to me? Obviously not or itâd be gone in a flash.

Maybe she should tell him.

Or not.

She had to do something. She was getting close to melting here. âI think youâd better let me goâMr McMaster,â she managed, and he did. He shifted away a little, without comment, as if it meant nothing. As if holding her hadnât caused him any sort of reaction. Nothing like the sizzle that had just jolted through her.

âSo are we waiting for the baby to be born so we can take DNA samples and enforce a paternity suit?â he asked, and they were talking about Millicent. Of course they were.

âMaybe not.â She was totally discombobulated. It wasnât just the feel of his arm. It was so much more. âIâ¦ one of the bulls is a Murray Grey.â

âThatâs bad?â

âIf youâre a Friesian crossed with a Jersey, itâs very bad. Have you ever met a Murray Grey?â

âI canât say I have.â

âTheyâre about half Millicentâs size again. Sheâs still underdeveloped. If weâd found her straight away we could have done something, but she got out and we lost her and didnât find her for ages. What must have happened was that she got out onto the road, wandered along happily, we suspect, looking for bulls because sheâs that sort of girl. Whoever found her must have shooed her through the nearest gate to get her off the roadâwhich, of course, happened to be Rod Palmerâs bull paddock. There was plenty of feed in the paddock. Itâs hilly and mostly out of sight of the road and Rod lets his bulls be until he needs them. So Millicent might have been enjoying herself for quite a while. She certainly seemed content when Rod finally found her and called us.â

âUh-oh,â he said. âSo now?â

âSo now sheâs in the house paddock while we wait for the

birth. Signs are any day now. I hope to heaven she doesnât drop over Christmas because thereâs no way weâll get a vet.â Then a thought occurred and she eyed him with hope. âAs well as carsâ¦ You didnât have a houseful of pets you practised on when you were a kid as well?â she enquired. âMaybe a cow or two, and a resident vet?â

âNary a goldfish.â

âNot even a dog?â she demanded, startled.

âMy family donât do pets.â

âBut you like them.â

âJust because I patted Killerâ¦â

âNo, but you do. When weâre out on siteâ¦ Every time we meet a dog you talk to it. You should have one.â

âAnd leave him in my Manhattan apartment alone, for months at a time?â

âYou have staff. Is Mr Himmel still around?â

âLong gone.â That was said bleakly and she thoughtâdonât go there. She was pushing past anywhere that was her business. Move on.

But move on where? Move onto where she wanted to go?

Why not?

âSoâ¦so do you need to go over to Jennyâs again later?â she managed.

âJennyâs?â

âMickeyâs. To make more phone calls.â

âI rang Elinor while I was in Curalo.â

Elinor. First name. The word hung between them, loaded with unknowns.

Leave it, she thought, but then she thought if she was Letty sheâd ask. She swung her legs against the fence rails and tried to look nonchalant. As if this was a lightweight question.

âSo the gossip rags havenât caught up with Elinor?â

âI hope they never do.â It was said with such vehemence that she blinked.

âUmâ¦itâs serious then?â

He seemed disconcerted but then he shrugged. âYou could say that.â

âIâm sorry youâll miss Christmas with her, then.â

âIâm sorry, too.â He swung himself down from the fence and

she knew the question had messed with whatever calm heâd been feeling. âI believe I need to get that carburettor back in. Without it, weâre dependent on the tractor as emergency transport so Iâm not going to bed before itâs in working order. Itâs okay. Twenty minutes work, tops. Iâm not being a martyr.â He glanced down at his overalls and he smiled, with unmistakable all-boy satisfaction. âI havenât looked this greasy since I was Scottâs age. It feels great.â

âYou are great,â she said as he reached up and took her by the waist and lifted her down to join him. He should let her go. He didnât.

âSo are you.â

Uh-oh.

Keep it light, she told herself. *Keep it light.* âIf our office staff could see us now theyâd have kittens,â she managed.

âOr a cameraman.â

The paparazzi. That was an appalling thought. She could see the headlines now: *McMaster Trapped with Secretary in Rural Hideway*â¦ What would the unknown Elinor say if she saw such a headline?

âDoes Elinor know youâre stuck with me?â He was still holding her. She should step awayâbut she didnât.

âYes,â he said.

âShe doesnât mind?â

âSheâs upset for me. She knows I want to be home.â

For some reason that hurt, but she made herself respond. âThatâs generous of Elinor.â

âSheâs a generous woman.â

What to say to that? And he was still holding her.

âIâ¦I need to go to bed,â she managed and she tugged a little but still he didnât release her.

âBed?â

âIn case you hadnât noticed, itâs nine, which is the witching hour when milking starts at five.â

âSo you donât look forward to your morning milk?â he teased.

He was so closeâ¦ She was having trouble making her voice work but she had to try. âGetting up at fiveâ¦ Ugh,â she said. âBut while Iâm here itâs normal. For lots of people itâs normal. You get up at five to check on your trade indices all the time.

You donât mind.â

âSo what do you want to do at five?â

âSleep!â

He smiled, then put his head on one side, considering. âSo why stay on here? Youâre putting your life on hold for your little brother.â

âI havenât noticed much life-holding.â

âWhereâs the social life? When you work with me I demand twenty-four seven commitment. Then you come here and it seems the same. Milking from five to nine and milking from three to seven. Whereâs time for Meg in that?â

He sounded concerned, and that disconcerted her. Heâd never sounded concerned. Their relationship was businesslike.

It had to stay that way.

âI have wild lunches,â she told him.

âRight.â He was watching her in a way that disturbed her. As if he was trying to figure her out.

âSoâ¦boyfriend?â he asked and she winced. Ouch. Thatâd do as far as personal questions went. He set his boundaries. Sheâd set hers.

âThatâs not your territory, Mr McMaster.â She tugged back and this time he did let her go. She made to turn away but his next question stopped her.

âDo you like working for me?â

That was an easy one. âI love it.â

âWhy?â

She hesitated. He was watching her in the fading light, and she knew her answer meant something to him.

âItâs smart work,â she said slowly. âI never know what my dayâs going to hold. I need to use my brain, and I love it that you treat me like I can.â

âLike you can what?â

âRise to any challenge.â She managed a smile at that. âExcept get you home for Christmas.â

He didnât smile back. Silence. The sun had sunk well over the horizon and the light was disappearing fast. The night was warm and still. Millicent was right beside them by the fence, oozing the contentment of a soon-to-be mum who had everything she wanted in life.

Except she didnât have her bull, Meg thought, and then thought what was she thinking? *Her bull?*

âBed,â she said.

âSounds good,â he said and she blushed and stepped away so fast she tripped on her own feet. He put out a hand to catch her but she staggered and grabbed the fence and maintained her distance.

âIs there anything else you need?â she asked, stammering.

âI donât believe so.â He was laughing, she thoughtânot obviously, but there was laughter behind his eyes. âSo do we have a date with a hundred cows at five in the morning?â

âI canât believe you offered to milk.â

âIt will be my pleasure.â

âIn lieu of the worldâs trade indices.â

âIn lieu of trade indices.â He hesitated. âI really donât mind getting up early,â he told her. âIf you need to sleepâ¦ I wish I could milk them for you.â

He was serious.

âYeah, well, I do have some affection for the cows,â she managed. âThough itâs a wonderful offerâ¦â She took a deep breath. âAs was buying Scott the car. Iâd like to pay.â

âGet off your high horse, Jardine.â

âItâs not my high horse, itâs my dignity,â she said with as much dignity as she could muster. âBy which I take it that you wonât let me. In which case Iâm very, very grateful. So thank you, Mr McMaster, and goodnight.â

âWilliam,â he said, and it was a snap.

âWilliam, then,â she said and met his gaze for as long as she daredâwhich wasnât very long at all.

âSleep well,â he said and, before she knew what he was about, he reached out and touched her face. It was a feather touch, a fleeting brush of his finger against her cheek, but he might as well have kissed her. She raised her hand to her cheek as if heâd applied heat. Maybe he had.

âSleepâ¦sleep well yourself,â she whispered.

âIâll see what I can do,â he said. âAnd Meg?â

âYes?â

âThank you for rising to my challenges. I appreciate it.â

He was still so close. She desperately wanted him to touch

her again. She stood and stared up at him, but there was nothing to say.

She desperately wanted him to kiss her.

And where would businesslike be after that?

âGoodâ¦goodnight,â she managed, and then she turned and left him standing in the darkness leaning against a pregnant cow.

She knew that he watched her all the way back to the house.

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He should move. He still had to get the carburettor in and he did have to get up at the same time as she did. Instead, he watched Megâs retreating figure and when she disappeared he stood and stared at the darkened house, lit only by its ridiculous decorations. Santaâs legs were lurching at an even more alarming rate.

That was the morningâs job, he decided. Heâd do it after milking. Then heâd replace Lettyâs exhaust pipe. Then heâd help Scott with the Mini. He was looking forward to each of them.

So much for feeling trapped.

This was a weird sensation. The McMaster family business, a vast mining conglomerate, had been founded by his grandfather. Williamâs father hadnât wanted to go near the business. His grandfather, however, had found his retiring grandson to be intelligent and biddable, and heâd thrown William in at the deep end.

That had been okay by William. He enjoyed the cut and thrust of the business world and in a way it made up for the lack of affection in his family. His grandfather had approved of him when he was doing well for the company, and on his grandfatherâs death heâd simply kept on with what he was good at. That was what the world expected. It was what he expected of himself.

But hereâ¦ Heâd forgotten how much he loved pulling a car apart. Heâd loved his time with Scott.

As heâd love returning to Manhattan, he reminded himself.

When he finally arrived at Elinorâs apartment, his reception would be just as crazy as Megâs had been. Or maybe not quite, he conceded. Ned was six years old and his little sister was four. They could bounce but they didnât quite equate to a five-dog

pack, a grandma and a brother. And Elinorâ¦ Her smile would be as warm as it was possible for a smile to be, but Elinor was a sixty-two-year-old foster mother and she welcomed the world.

Like Letty.

Like Meg, too.

No. Donât think about Meg, he told himself. Itâs making you crazy. Meg was his PA. He was leaving in two days and he did not want to mess with their employer/employee relationship.

The problem was, though, that he was no longer able to think of her purely as his employee.

Heâd called her Meg.

Donât think about her, he told himself again sharply as he headed for the shed. Think about people he could justifiably be attached to.

Like Elinor. Elinor expected nothing, which was just the way he liked it.

Heâd been introduced to Elinor two years back, at the launch of New Yorkâs Foster-Friends programme. The programme was designed to give support to those who put their lives on hold for kids in need. Heâd been approached to be a sponsor, heâd met Elinor at the launch and heâd been sucked right in by her commitment. Elinor was everything he wasnâtâwarm, devoted and passionate about Pip and Ned, the two kids in her care.

Tentatively, heâd suggested helping a little himself. Part-time commitment. Walking away when he needed to. It soundedâ¦feasible. âIâm not often availableâ heâd said and Elinor had beamed as if he were promising the world.

âAnythingâs better than what these two have been getting up to now,â sheâd said simply. âIt breaks my heart their Mama wonât put them up for adoption and they so need a Papa. You come when you can and you leave the rest to me.â

The thought of letting them down at Christmas had made him feel ill, but Elinorâs big-hearted wisdom had come straight back at him.

âI have a turkey. We have candy and paper lanterns and a tree. Weâre going out today to see the fancy shop windows and then the kids are visiting Santa. You get home when you can and weâll love to see you, but donât you worry about us, Mr McMaster. Weâll do fine.â

The relationship suited him fine. Elinor didnât depend on him. She gave her heart to the kids.

As Meg had given her heart to her half brother, and to a woman who wasnât really her grandmother.

Meg was a giver. His cool, clinical PA was just like Elinor, and for some reason the thought had the capacity to scare him.

Why?

He didnât want to think about why. He reached the shed but he paused before flicking on the lights and going inside. He glanced back at the houseâwhere Meg was.

Donât think about Meg.

Those Santa legs were getting on his nerves. Maybe he should try and fix them now.

And fall off the roof in the dark. Theyâd find him tomorrow, tangled in flashing Christmas lights, a cloud of self-pity hanging round his head.

âSo maybe youâd better go to bed and stop thinking about fixing things,â he told himself.

Things? Plural?

What else needed to be fixed?

âLettyâs car, the Mini and Santaâs legs,â he said out loud. âWhat else is there? Why would I want anything in my world to change?â

What indeed?

The Santa legs were seriously disconcerting. He turned his gaze upward where a million stars hung in the sky, brighter than heâd ever seen them.

âThere are too many stars out here,â he told himself. âThey make a man disoriented. The worldâs the wrong way up. Iâve had enough.â

He flicked on the lights and went inside, but outside he knew the stars stayed hanging. Still the wrong way up.

Theyâd be the wrong way up until he could get out of here. Which should be soon.

Which had to be soon, because he was having trouble remembering what the right way up looked like.

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She lay in her bed and she thoughtâI am in so much trouble.

Her boss wore jeans. He looked great with greasy hands. He smiled at herâ¦

Do not fall in love with your boss.

How not to?

Itâs simply a crush, she told herself desperately. Heâs been touted as one of the most eligible bachelors in the world. When he finally smiles at you like youâre a womanâlike youâre a friendâof course youâre going to fall for him.

Any woman would.

So any woman must not make a fool of herself. Any woman had to remember that he moved in a different world to hers, that he was in Australia for three months of the year at the most and the rest he was withâ¦

A woman called Elinor in Manhattan?

She so badly wanted the Internet. She wanted to check out any rumours. W S McMaster and a woman called Elinor.

You have it bad, she told the ceiling and when the door wobbled a little bit on its hinges and slowly opened she almost stopped breathing. Was itâ¦?

Killer. Her dog had obviously decided his duty was with her rather than as one of Scottyâs pack. He nosed her hand and then climbed laboriously up onto her bed, making hard work out of what was, for Killer, hardly a step.

âYour mistress is in trouble,â she told him and he whumped down on top of her and she had to shove him away a bit so she could breathe. He promptly turned and tried to lick her.

âOkay, youâre the only man in my life. And if I was to think about admitting another oneâ¦â

Another lick, this time longer

âYeah, no room, youâre right. Forget it. We have to go to sleep. Thereâs milking in the morning and tomorrow itâs Christmas Eve.â

She hadnât written her Santa list. The thought came from nowhere. As a little girl, that was the major job before Christmas. In truth, as a child sheâd usually started her Santa list in November.

âWell, itâs no use asking for what I want now,â she told Killer and then she heard what sheâd said and she winced.

But it was true. She did want it.

âMe and every single woman in the known universe,â she muttered. âEspecially someone called Elinor. Killer, get off me and let me go to sleep.â

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She thought Elinor was his woman.

He lay and stared up at the attic ceiling and thought through the events of the dayâand that was the fact that stood out.

He hadnât lied to her. But he had let her thinkâ¦

âDefence,â he told the darkness and thoughtâhow conceited was that? As if she was going to jump himâ¦

Heâd had women trying to jump him before. He knew how to defend himself.

He wasnât the least worried about Meg overstepping the line.

The line.

Meg.

See, there was the problem, he told himself. Heâd let himself call her Meg. Heâd let himself think about her as Meg. She was his employee, his wonderful, efficient PA. All he had to do was go back to thinking of her as Miss Jardine and all would be well.

But sheâd feltâ¦

And there was another problem. He could give his head all the orders he liked, but his body was another matter entirely. When heâd tugged her down from the fence sheâd fallen against him. Her body had felt soft, pliable, curving into him, even if only for a fraction of a second before sheâd tugged away. And she smelled of something he couldnât identify. Not perfume, he thought, and he knew most, but something else. Citrusy, cleanâ¦

Sheâd spent most of the day surrounded by cows. How could she smell clean?

She did, and this wasnât getting him anywhere. He needed to sleep. He had a big day tomorrow, milking cows, fixing thingsâ¦ Trying not to think about Meg.

Miss Jardine.

Why not think of her? It was a tiny voice, insidious, starting from nowhere.

Because you donât.

The thought of Hannah was suddenly with him, Hannah, holding him, loving him, and suddenlyâ¦not there. The pain had been unbelievable.

His world was hard. He had no illusions as to what wealth could do to people, marriages, relationships. Wealth had destroyed his parents, turned them into something ugly, surrounded by sycophants in their old age. It took enormous self-control to stop himself from being sucked down the same path.

And he had no idea how to cope with an emotional connection.

It didnât matter. His work was satisfying. His life was satisfying, and if there were spacesâ¦Elinor and the kids were enough.

They took what he had to give.

Maybe Megâ¦

âDonât even go there,â he said savagely into the night. âYouâre not as selfish as that. She deserves so much more.â

CHAPTER SIX

IT TOOK Meg a while to wake up on milking mornings. She liked working in silence for the first half hour or so, and that suited the cows. They usually seemed to be half asleep too, ridding themselves of their load of milk before getting on with their daily task of grazing, snoozing and making more.

But, eventually, Meg woke up. Whether she was working with Letty or Kerrie, by the time milking ended she usually had the radio on, she was chatting to whoever was around, singing along with the radio; even the cows seemed more cheerful.

But not this morning. Her boss seemed to have left his bed on the wrong side. He worked methodically, swabbing, attaching cups, releasing cows from the bales, but answering any ventured conversation with monosyllables. Yes, no, and nothing more was forthcoming.

It was probably for the best, Meg decided as they worked on. Yesterday had threatened to get out of hand. She wasnât quite sure what it was that was getting out of hand, but whatever it was scared her. She knew enough to retreat now into her own world and let W S McMaster get on with his.

It was disconcerting, though. With milking finished, William handled the hose with none of yesterdayâs enjoyment. She found herself getting irritated, and when Craig arrived to pick up the milk and gestured towards William and said, âSo whoâs the boyfriend?â she was able to shake her head without even raising colour. Whoâd want someone like this for a boyfriend?

âHeâs someone I work with. Heâs stuck here because of the airline strike.â

âAnd he bought the kid the Minis?â It seemed the whole district knew about the Minis. Craigâs son had been under the car pile last night and would be back here this morning.

âYeah.â

âGood move,â he said approvingly. He glanced across at William, obviously aching to talk cars, but William was

concentrating on getting the yard hosed and nothing was distracting him. âSeemed happier yesterday,â he noted.

âHeâs homesick.â

âWife? Kids?â

âNo.â

âThen whatâs he whinging about?â Craig demanded. He yelled over to William, âHey, Will. Merry Christmas. Thereâs no dairy pick-up tomorrow, so have a good one.â

William raised a hand in a slight salute and went on hosing. Craig departed and Meg surveyed her boss carefully.

âWeâve offended you?â

He shrugged.

Oh, enough. âItâs Christmas Eve,â she said. âLighten up.â

âIâll finish here. You go do something else. Donât you have to stuff a turkey or something?â

âRight,â she said and stalked out of the yard, really irritated now. She was hungry. Sheâd intended to wait for William before she ate breakfast, but he could eat his toast alone.

She detoured via Millicent, and that made her pause. Millicent was standing in the middle of the home paddock, her back arched a little and her tail held high. Uh-oh. When Meg slipped through the rails and crossed to check, the cow relaxed and let Meg rub her nose, but Meg thought the calf would be here soon, today or tomorrow.

Here was another factor to complicate her Christmas. Letty would worry all day.

Every now and then a cow came along you got fond of. Millicent was one of those. Born after a difficult labour, sheâd been a weakling calf. A hard-headed dairy farmer would have sold her straight away. Letty, however, had argued the pros and cons with herself for a week while tending to her like a human baby, and after a week sheâd decided she had potential.

Sheâd named her before sheâd decided to name the rest of the herd, and sheâd been gutted when sheâd been lost. Finding her had been a joy.

âSo letâs do this right for Letty,â Meg told her and went and fetched her a bucket of chaff and shooed her closer to the trough. âNo complications for Christmas.â

There was nothing more she could do now, though. Labour in cows didnât require a support person, at least in the early stages.

Breakfast. Hunger. And donât think about William, she told herself; he was yet another complication she didnât need.

And then a scream split the morning, a scream so high and terrified Megâs heart seemed to stop. She forgot all about William, forgot about Millicentâs complications, and she started to run.

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The concrete was as clean as he could make it. No speck of dirt was escaping his eagle eye this morning and he finally turned off the tap with regret. Move on to the next thing fast, he thought. He had today and tomorrow to get through while keeping things businesslike.

Meg would be in the kitchen, having breakfast. Yesterday heâd watched her eat toast. Before yesterday heâd never watched her eat toast. Yes, he travelled with her often, but when he did he ordered breakfast in his room. He wasted less time that way.

But yesterday heâd decided he liked watching her eat breakfast. Dumb or not, it wasnât a bad way to waste time.

A man could waste a lot of time watching Meg.

And that was exactly what he was trying not to think. He wound the hose back onto the reel with more force than was necessary and thought heâd see if Scott was in the shed yet. It was after eight. He could talk to Scott for a while and then maybe Meg would be finished in the kitchen.

What sort of coward was he? What was to be afraid of, watching Meg eat toast?

Meg. Miss Jardine.

Meg.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. Two daysâ¦

He could do this. He turned towards the house, irritated with himself. All this needed was a bit of discipline. Containment.

And thenâ¦a scream.

Forget containment. He ran.

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It was Letty. Where? Where?

As Meg neared the house Letty screamed again.

Dear Godâ¦

She was high up on the roof, right by the Santa chimney. Had she been trying to fix him? But now wasnât the time for questions. Letty was dangling from the ridge, tiny and frail and in deadly peril.

The roof had two inclines, the main one steep enough, but the attic gable rising even more steeply. The roof was old, the iron was rusting, and the capping on the high ridge had given way. Or was giving way. It hadnât given completely.

It was all that was holding Letty up.

Scotty burst out of the house as Meg arrived. âGrandma!â

âSheâs on the roof.â

The capping tore again, just a little, iron scraping on iron. Letty lurched downward but somehow still held.

âGrandma,â Scott screamed, his voice breaking in terror. âHang on!â

Meg was too busy to scream. How had she climbed? The ladderâ¦ Where? By the gate.

But then William was beside her, reaching the ladder before she did. âHold it,â he snapped. âScott, hold the other side.â

The capping tore more, and Letty lurched again.

âLetty, hold on,â William ordered her, in a voice that brooked no argument. âFingernails if you must, but do not let go. Iâm coming.â

âHâ¦hurry.â

He was already climbing. âKeep still.â

How could you defy that voice? Why would you?

Nobody moved. Meg and Scott held to the ladder as if their lives depended on it.

Their lives didnât. Lettyâs did, and so did Williamâs.

The roof was high pitched, curved, dangerous, and the ladder only reached part way to the top ridge. William clambered over the main eaves as if they werenât there. It was impossible to climb further, Meg thought numbly from underneath. The second gable was far too steepâbut somehow William was doing it.

âYouâll fall,â she faltered.

âNot me,â he said, finding footholds she knew couldnât exist. âMountaineering 101âBasic skills for your modern businessman. Watch and wonder.â

She watched, and yes, she wondered, but it wasnât

admiration she was feeling. It was blind terror. Please. Please.

And then somehow, unbelievably, William was on the upper ridge, edging himself toward Letty. Santaâs sleigh was between them. He shoved; it tumbled back behind the house and no one noticed its going.

He edged closerâ¦closerâ¦while below him Meg and Scott forgot to breathe.

Heâd reached her. He was steadying, stabilising himself over the ridge, grasping Lettyâs wrists and holding.

He had her.

âDonât move. Just lie limp and let me pull you up.â

Scotty choked on a sob. Meg gripped his hand and held, taking comfort as well as giving it. Letty wasnât safe yet. William was still balanced on a ridge with an already broken capping.

The ladder only reached to the eaves of the main roof, so what now? William might be able to climb up like a cat burglar. It was impossible that he climb down holding Letty.

âMeg?â

âYâ¦yes?â

âI canât get us down,â he told her. âNot the way I came up. If I overbalance weâll both go.â

She knew it. They needed the fire brigade, she thought. They needed help.

They had no phone. The nearest neighbour was a mile away, but William already knew that.

âIâm buying you a satellite phone for Christmas,â he muttered. âIf it costs a million bucks youâre still having one.â He had Letty solidly under the arms now and was hauling her upward like a limp doll. âSo Letty, are you going to argue?â

âNâ¦No.â

âGood woman.â One last heave and he had her on the ridge, into his arms.

She was safe, Meg thought. Orâ¦safeish. With the capping gone the whole attic roof looked unstable but at least Letty was no longer dangling.

Butâ¦ Her wrist looked hurt. She could see a crimson stain from here. She was losing blood?

William was inching backward along the ridge, heading for the chimney. He could lean on the bricks. Safeish was turning to

safe.

Sort of. Until he came to get her down.

âThis cutâs not looking good,â he said, almost conversationally, and Meg thought he was trying not to scare Letty. But she knew this voice. It meant he wanted action, fast. He tugged Letty hard against him, leaned back against the chimney to make them both stable, then ripped the sleeve from his overalls, as if it was gauze instead of industrial-strength cotton. He wound the fabric round her arm and held her close.

âSo how did you get up here?â he asked.

Letty didnât answer. Not a good sign.

He stared downward, seemingly as mystified as Meg. That Letty could have scrambled up the way he had seemed incredible.

âThereâ¦thereâs another ladder,â Scott ventured. He was shaking, and Megâs hand firmed over his. âAnother ladder?â

âWhen I put the sleigh up I used two.â

âYou used twoâ¦â

âIt fell,â Letty muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. âAs I reached the top. I grabbed, but it went and then I grabbed the capping.â

Meg was no longer listening. She was searching the undergrowth, and here it was. Another ladder, buried behind the banksias.

Scott and Letty had both climbed up on this ancient roof using two ladders. Alone.

Were they out of their minds?

She shouldnât have left them. She shouldâve been here. She shouldâ¦

Just get a grip, she told herself. Blame needed to wait.

âIâll get the ladder back up,â she called to William. âHold on.â

There was no time for hesitation. She moved the main ladder along the wall so it was wedged against the yard gate, so Scott could hold it steady by himself. Then she headed up, tugging the smaller ladder with her.

âMegâ¦â William sounded appalled. âWhat do you think youâre doing?â

âScottâs done it. Lettyâs done it. If all of my stupid family is

intent on self destruction I might as well join them. Thereâs no alternative.â

There wasnât. He knew there wasnât.

âYou fall and youâre fired,â he snapped.

âThatâs right. Resort to threats under pressure. You fall and I quit,â she snapped back, and caught the flash of a rueful smile.

Butâ¦ How had Letty and Scotty done this, she thought, as she struggled upward. Theyâd climbed the first ladder dragging the next, each doing it alone?

Sheâd looked at Santaâs legs last night and sheâd thought the same as Letty obviously hadâthat sheâd have a go at fixing him. But Letty was in her seventies, and that Scott could have tried with his leg in a braceâ¦

She shuddered and she paused, half way up the ladder.

âYou can do it,â William said strongly and she looked up and met his gaze and took a deep breath.

During the years sheâd worked for William sheâd been given the most extraordinary orders. Sheâd done the most extraordinary things.

You can do it.

She loved working for William.

You fall and youâre fired.

What did he think she was? A wuss? She climbed on.

She reached the first eave. She balanced herself, took a deep breath and swung the second ladder up to the next eave.

âNo,â William said.

âNo?â

âIt wonât hold.â He sounded calm now, back in control. Heâd obviously been using the time while she struggled to think the scenario through. âI can see where it fell. The gutteringâs broken and thereâs no guarantee it wonât break again. Youâll need to lie a plank along its length so the ladderâs weightâs on half a dozen fastenings instead of one.â

âIâll get a plank,â Scott said.

âScott!â Williamâs voice would have stopped an army.

âWhat?â

âLet that ladder go before your sisterâs down and youâre fired, too. Meg, leave the ladder where it is and go find the plank with Scott. You do this together. My way or not at all.â

Meg looked at her boss. He looked straight back.

âLetâs do what the man says,â she told her little brother. âHeâs the boss.â

They found a beam, ten foot long. Scott heaved from below and she tugged. She laid it along the length of guttering. She shifted the second ladder so it was balanced on the midpoint and it was as safe as they could make it. Done.

All William had to do was edge Letty back along the ridgeâand let Meg take her down.

âYou canât.â Williamâs voice was agonised as they faced this final step, but he knew the facts. Meg was five foot five; he was six feet two. He weighed at least forty pounds more than she did. Everything depended on the guttering holding.

Letty couldnât climb herself. It was Meg whoâd support Letty on the way down.

Slowly William edged back along the ridge, lifting Letty a little at each move. She was so limp, Meg thought. She couldnât get her down if she lost consciousness. Butâ¦

âIâm saving my strength,â Letty whispered.

âYouâre a woman with intelligence as well as courage,â William said, and he met Megâs gaze, and she thoughtâ¦

She thoughtâ¦

Yeah, well, there wasnât a lot of use going down that path. Of all the inappropriate things to think right now. He looked lean and mean and dangerous. He had torn overalls, bloodstained chest, one arm bared. His expression was grim and focussed. He was totally intent on what he was doing. He lookedâ¦ He lookedâ¦

She knew how he looked. She also knew how he was making her feel, and somehow it made thingsâ¦

Scarier? That sheâd decided she loved a man who was balanced on a crumbling ridge, with her injured grandmother in his arms and her little brother underneath, and if they fellâ¦

Umâ¦get a grip.

She gripped.

William was moving so slowly there was no risk of him overbalancing. He was shifting Letty a few inches at a time.

The wait was interminable.

âI have you steady.â It was Scott from underneath them. Heâd climbed the first ladder and was holding the second.

This was saferâexcept it meant Scotty was right beneath her.

âScottâ¦â she started and she knew her voice quavered.

âScottâs fine. No oneâs going to fall,â William said. It was his âno oneâs going home until this is sortedâ voice. Meg blinked. Okay, she couldnât defy him on this one.

âLetty, you need to trust us all,â William said. âMeg will catch your legs while you find a footing on the ladder. Sheâll be right under you, pressing you into the rungs. Youâll hold as best you can with one hand. Thatâs all youâll need. Meg will be guiding your feet, holding you firm. Donât release the first rung until you feel totally stable; stable enough to reach under for the next. If you canât do it then stop until you feel you can. Thereâs no rush. We have all the time in the world.â

All the time in the world. Except Letty looked dreadful. If she faintedâ¦

If she fainted then Meg would catch her and hold her and somehow get her down. No oneâs going to fall. The guy in the bloodstained overalls had said so.

âAs soon as you have her Iâll slide down the ridge the way I came up,â William said. âIâll be beneath you.â

âWhat, slide and jump?â Meg retorted. âYou want a broken leg? Scottyâs underneath and heâll do any catching.â

âI will,â Scott said, and Meg looked up and met Williamâs gaze and saw agony. William McMaster depended on no one. For him to depend on a kid like Scottâ¦

No choice. No oneâs going to fall.

And somehow no one did. Somehow William got a limp and trembling Letty onto Megâs ladder. Somehow Meg held her, guiding her every step of the way. Somehow they climbed down, rung after rung.

âWomen are awesome,â Letty muttered as they reached the lower guttering and manoeuvred across to the next ladder. Meg even managed a smile.

âYou bet. You ready for the next bit, Grandma?â

âBring it on.â Lettyâs voice might be a thready whisper but her spirit was indomitable.

And then it was done. As they reached the ground Letty sagged but Scott was there. It was Scott who lifted his grandmother from the ladder. He had his Grandma in his arms, and then Meg was there, too, hugging them both.

And William was down, as well. He stood back, and Meg saw him over Lettyâs head, and she reached out and tugged him in as well. Her big, bloodstained hero. Her boss.

William.

They hugged together. Sandwich squeeze, sheâd called this when she was little, when the family was celebrating, or something dreadful had happened, or sometimes simply because they could. Because they were family.

And this felt the same. It feltâ¦ Family?

Except William wasnât. She knew he wasnât, so it shouldnât hurt when he was the first to pull away.

It did. Even though he must.

âLetâs have a look at that arm,â William said in a voice that was none too steady, and she knew he was feeling the whole gamut of emotions she was feeling. Only maybe not the family one.

There was a woman called Elinor?

Lettyâs knees had given completely. Scott brought cushions and blankets while Meg and William assessed the damage as best they could. Lettyâs arm was bound tightly with Williamâs sleeve, but the crimson bloom was spreading.

âI donât think we should disturb it,â William said. âWhereâs the nearest hospital.â

âIâm not going to hospital,â Letty quavered and for an answer William simply scooped her up, blankets and all.

âCar keys,â he snapped at Meg. âYou sit in the back seat with your grandmother. Scott, are you coming?â

Someone had turned into the drive. Mickey and his Dad, Meg thought, recognising the car, come to play with the Minis.

âMaybeâ¦maybe I should stay,â Scott managed and then tried to get his voice down a quaver or two. âIâ¦Mickey can help me clean up.â

That Letty hadnât squeaked a second protest was scary, but William had her in his arms, heading for the car, and Meg could spare a moment to think things through. Scott loathed hospitals, for good reason. She could see he was torn. She needed to give him a reason to stay, and she had one. One pregnant cow.

âI need you to keep an eye on Millicent,â she said.

âWhy?â

âSheâs showing the first signs of calving.â

âMy Millicentâ¦â Letty squeaked over Williamâs shoulder.

âYour Millicent,â Meg retorted. âWhoâs staying in the care of your grandson, and Mickey and Mickeyâs Dad. Thereâs two for you and three for Millicent. So whoâs arguing, Grandma?â

âNo oneâs arguing,â William said. âLetâs go.â

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE gash on her arm was deep and jagged. The doctors wanted to keep Letty in overnight, an option she wouldnât consider.

âJust pull it together and let me go. I have a turkey to stuff.â

Finally, they conceded that she could go home, but only after they were sure she was okay. âSheâs lost a lot of blood, sheâs elderly and sheâs shocked,â the doctor on duty told them as they wheeled her off to Theatre. âWeâll tie her down for a couple of hours to make sure there arenât complications. Can you wait?â

âWe can wait,â William said and he and Meg went to sit in the waiting room. Meg picked up a glossy magazine and stared sightlessly at its pages.

He shouldnât go near her, William decided.

Her hands were still shaking.

How could he not go to her? He moved to the seat next to hers and touched her hand.

She put her magazine down and blinked back tears.

So much for not going near her. He put his arm round her and tugged her close.

Her whole body was shaking.

âItâs okay. Baby, itâs okay.â

âIâm notâ¦â She gulped and tried to pull away. âIâm not bâ¦baby.â

âMiss Jardine, itâs okay,â he said, and pulled her closer still.

That brought a chuckle, but a watery one. She sniffed and reached for a tissue in her overalls pocket. She blew her nose, hard, and he thought, how could he go back to calling her Miss Jardine? This wasnât his super-efficient PA. This was someone he no longer knew.

Or maybeâ¦ Maybe it was just that he hadnât known his super-efficient PA, because it was starting to feel as if he did know this woman, and he wanted to know more.

âIfâ¦if the paparazzi could see us now,â she muttered and he

winced. What a thing to think.

Theyâd come straight from the cow yard. Theyâd been filthy to begin with and Lettyâs blood had added a layer that was truly appalling.

âI think the chances of me being recognised are about zip,â he said. âWeâre safe.â

âWe are,â she whispered. âThanks to you. How did you ever get up on that roof?â

âI have skills you canât even begin to imagine,â he said, trying to make her smile.

âCan you fix Santa when we get home?â

âWhat?â He looked at her and discovered she was smilingâshe was joking. She was still shaking but there was no way she was sinking into self-pity.

âI have a better idea,â he said unsteadily. âLetâs toss a grenade into the fireplace and blast him right out of there. All Iâve seen so far have been legs. A life without a head canât be all that satisfying. Letâs put him out of his misery.â

She choked on something that could be a bubble of laughter or it could be tears, he couldnât decide which, and he hugged her closer and he simply held.

Eventually, the tremors stopped. He didnât let her go, though. It felt okay to sit here and hold herâas if he had the right.

Did he want the right?

What sort of dumb thing was that to think? The shock of the morning must be getting to him.

She felt right, he thought. Holding her felt right.

But then a nurse came through the door and said, âMiss Jardine?â and he was no longer holding her. His side felt cold without her there.

âYes?â Meg was still frightened, he thought. Sheâd risen to face the nurse as if she was bracing for the worst.

Sheâd seen the worst, he thought. Sheâd have been here when her mother and stepfather were killed; when Scotty had been so appallingly injured.

She knew what happened when you let people get close.

He rose and stood beside her, and held her as the nurse approached.

But it was okay. âYour brotherâs on the phone,â the nurse said. He watched as she took a deep steadying breath and

nodded and moved away from the support of his arm and walked across to the nursesâ station to take the call.

He watched her as she spoke. She seemed totally unconscious of how she looked. How many women did he know who could be so unaware of what they were wearing? His comment about her clothes had made her smile but she certainly wasnât thinking about them.

He watched her talk; he watched her as she replaced the receiver. He watched the quiet dignity as she thanked the nurse. He watched her walk back to him and he thought, sheâs a woman in a million. A woman to change your life plans for?

How crazy a thought was that?

âOur phoneâs back on,â she told him. âIt came back on just after we left. The line must be mended. Mickeyâs mum and dad are both there now and Jennyâs stuffing our turkey and making brandy sauce. Millicentâs calving hasnât progressed any furtherâIan thinks the calfâs a while off. The boys are playing with the cars. Jennyâs called in the neighbours and three men are up on the roof putting tarpaulins over the capping in case thereâs rain before we can get a builder in. Oh, and theyâve fixed Santa Claus.â

âTheyâve fixedâ¦â

âBut his sleighâs broken beyond repair. Thereâs nothing they can do about that so Santaâs escape routeâs gone. Weâre stuck with him.â She was smiling now, though her smile was a bit watery.

âHooray,â he said faintly, and he couldnât keep his gaze from her face. Why hadnât he realised just how beautiful she was? Heâd been blind.

âHooray at last,â she repeated and her voice softened. âItâs all okay again. I have help. Scott says thereâs no rush to get home. Christmas is back on track. Andâ¦and itâs thanks to you,â she said, and choked a bit again. âYou saved Letty. You saved us.â

âThereâs no need for hyperbole,â he said, embarrassed. âYou did some saving as well.â

âThereâs no way I would have got up on that roof in time to stop her falling.â

âYou donât know what you can do until you must.â

âIndeed you donât,â she said, and her eyes were shining and

she was close enough to touch. Close enough toâ¦

She backed away, as if suddenly something had touched her, reminded her. âIâ¦ thatâs all I wanted to say,â she faltered.

Was it all he wanted to say? He wanted more. He wanted to kiss her. In the middle of the emergency waiting room. With patients, medics, relatives everywhere.

He definitely wanted to kiss her.

âNo,â she said, and he met her gaze with a jolt of shock. Of course. This woman was seriously good. She anticipated his needs. That was what he paid her for.

Sheâd anticipated this one and she was refusing.

âIâ¦ I donât think we need to stay here,â she managed. She glanced at her watch, and that tiny movement put more distance between them. It made what he wanted to do even more impossible. âWe should do something while we wait. Go down and look at the sea?â

âHow about shopping?â he suggested. âI checked yesterdayâevery shop in the city will be open today.â

âYouâre joking,â she said, startled. âWalk through the Christmas crowds looking like this? We look like something out of *Chainsaw Massacre.*â

âHence my shopping plan. Are you hungry?â

Her eyes widened at that, as if remembering something important.

âYes,â she said. âYes, I am. Whatever happened to breakfast? â

He grinned. âI guess itâs still waiting beside the toaster at home.â *Home?* The word seemed to jar, and he corrected himself. âBack at the farm.â

âWe could grab a sandwich at the hospital cafeteria. I guess there is a hospital cafeteria.â

âI refuse to have hospital sandwiches on Christmas Eve. What I suggestâ¦â

âHere we go.â

âWhat?â

âWhat you suggestâ¦â

âWhatâs wrong with that?â

âItâs just *What I suggest* is McMaster for *Whatâs going to happen.*â

âIâm open to discussion,â he said, wounded, and she was

smiling again. More. She was laughing at him.

It was such a weird sensation that he felt winded.

No one laughed at him.

He kind ofâ¦liked it.

He grinned, and she grinned back, and suddenly there was such a frisson of tension between them that if a nurse hadnât approached he would have thrown reserve, caution, sense to the wind and taken her in his arms and kissed her, right on the spot. He still mightâ¦but the nurse was walking right up to them, speaking to Meg but glancing at him, as if he was included in this too.

Almost as if he was family.

âThe stitchingâs done,â she said. âThe doctors used a very light general anaestheticâthey thought it was more appropriate, given how shocked she isâand weâre popping in a little plasma to get her blood pressure up faster. I suspect sheâll sleep for two hours at least. Can you give us that time before you take her home?â

âYes,â William said before Meg could answer. âYes, we can.â He glanced at his cellphone and smiled. âHey, I have reception. Iâll give you my number. Can you ring us when she wakes? Meanwhile, I suggest Miss Jardine and I find something decent to wear and then eat.â

âAnd if I want hospital sandwiches?â Meg muttered but she was smiling too.

âIâm your boss,â he said. âThat has to count for something.â

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It counted for a lot, and so did money. Meg was simply led by Williamâs âsuggestionsâ.

First, he took her to what the nurse had told him when heâd enquired was âthe classiest clothes shop in townâ.

âShe needs a frock,â William said to the bemused assistant. âOr more. I suggest she buys three and everything that goes with them. Shoes, whatever.â He laid his credit card on the counter. âWhatever it takes.â

âThis feels like *Pretty Woman*,â Meg muttered. âIâm not for sale.â

âIâm not buying.â

She met his gaze. Something passed between them, changed. *Iâm not buying.*

Of course he wasnât, Meg thought. He had Elinor and women of her ilk. He escorted women from the pages of glamour magazines.

And, again, he knew what she was thinking. âYouâre my PA,â he said, his tone softening. âNothing more. Donât get any ideas, Jardine. Itâs just that I donât like my PA in blood-spattered overalls.â

He sounded suddenly formal and she shivered. The warmth that had been growing inside, the comfort sheâd felt as heâd held her, the bud of an idea, shrivelled.

The idea had been stupidâbut she had to move on.

âAnd I donât like my boss in blood-spattered overalls,â she managed and tilted her chin.

âWhich is why Iâm heading to the place Scott showed me yesterday to buy even more jeans,â he said. âSo Iâll leave you to it. No shaking while Iâm gone. Everythingâs fine.â

And, before she could guess what he intended, he took her hands, tugged her towards him and kissed her lightly on the lips. Only it wasnât how she wanted to be kissed. It was back to where sheâd started. It was a *Pretty Woman* kind of kiss. Take my plastic and buy what you need. Iâll comfort you and care for you, because youâre part of my entourage.

âDonât look like that, Miss Jardine,â he said softly. âIâm not buying your soul. Iâm only returning you to respectability.â

âMeg,â she said, and if she sounded forlorn she couldnât help it.

âI believe it should be Miss Jardine.â

âWillie,â she snapped and, before he could guess what she intended back, she grabbed his hands, tugged him toward her and kissed him as well. Harder. Defiant. âWillie,â she said again and glowered.

His lips twitched. There was laughter behind his eyes. And admiration.

And something more?

Something quickly quelled. Something he didnât want to admit?

No matter, it was gone, he was gone, and she was left with

his plastic.

âWow,â the sales assistant breathed as he disappeared into the crowd of last minute Christmas shoppers. âI wish my boyfriend would do something like this.â

âHeâs not my boyfriend.â

âOh, but heâs gorgeous.â

âIn blood-stained overalls?â

âHeâd be gorgeous in anything,â the girl breathed. âOh, missâ¦ Oh, letâs find you the prettiest dress in the shop. With a guy like that letting you use his credit card, you want to be gorgeous.â

âWith a guy like that I should wear a faded bag over my head,â Meg muttered but the sales assistant was already hauling out offerings.

She should not accept his money. Butâ¦

I suggestâ¦

This was W S McMaster talking. Her boss, giving orders. If she put things back on their rightful footing, sheâd accept.

Miss Jardine would accept. It was only Meg who was having stupid quibbles.

âShow me what you have,â she said, resigned. Two more days of autocracy and heâd be gone. Or sooner. She should check the news on the air strike.

Why didnât she want to?

âWhat about this?â the sales assistant asked, and held up a dress that made her gasp. It was pretty in the real sense of the word. It was a nineteen-fifties halter neck, cinch-waisted frock with a full circled skirt. It was white with red dots. It was young, frivolous and so far away from what Meg always wore that she shook her head before she thought about it.

She wore sensible black skirts and white shirts, or she wore overalls, or she wore jeans, and somewhere at home she had a pale grey skirt for church and funerals.

She did not wear polka dots.

âSomething sensible,â she said.

âItâs Christmas,â the girl said and then she looked at Megâs overalls. âAndâ¦excuse me for asking, but that looks bad.â

âIt nearly was bad.â

âSo it could have been bad,â the girl said and Meg realised she was in the hands of a master saleswoman. âAnd, if it had

been, youâd never have got the chance to wear polka dots. And heâ¦â she looked meaningfully in the direction William had gone ââ¦would never have seen you in polka dots.â

âPerish the thought,â Meg said, trying to sound sarcastic, but it didnât come off.

âSo will you try it?â

No, Meg thought. But she couldnât say it.

She looked at the dress, and then she also glanced in the direction William had gone. She could no longer see him.

Heâd be back.

Tomorrow or the next day heâd be gone.

What the heck. It was his plastic. *I suggest*â¦

She was merely following her bossâs orders. Only he no longer felt like her boss. He felt like something else completely.

So did she. She stared into the mirror and saw the woman sheâd been two days ago behind the woman she was now. And she thought of the impossibility of going back to what she had been.

Iâll be one of those elderly secretaries, she thought, totally devoted to the boss, taking whatever heâll give. âGood morning, Mr McMaster, of course Iâll take dictation, certainly Iâll send flowers to Sarah, I suggest tiger lilies because theyâre what the gossip columnists say is her favourite flower.â

Meanwhileâ¦

Meanwhile, Scotty had climbed on the roof to put Santa up himself and Letty had tried to fix it. If sheâd had a regular job, where she could go home every nightâ¦

Sheâd told herself this was better. Working twenty-four seven for short bursts and then staying home.

Sheâd loved twenty-four seven. She loved working for W S McMaster. But nowâ¦

Now sheâd seen William clinging to the roof, holding her grandma. Now William had held her at the hospital and sheâd needed him to hold her.

Two days ago sheâd been able to draw a lineâthat life, this life.

The lines had blurred and it frightened her.

Decisiveness had always been her strong point. She didnât have to like it but she knew when a decision had to be made. She made one now. Oh, but it hurt.

She took a deep breath. She glanced once more in the direction William had gone. Before he came back, she had to find some resolution.

She took the polka dots and disappeared into the changing roomâ¦to change.

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She was wearing polka dots.

Heâd left her wearing bloodied overalls and truly disgusting boots. She was now wearing what could only be described as a happy dress, a Christmas dress. Her boots had been replaced with white strappy stilettos and her hair, caught back with an elastic band while sheâd done the milking, was now a riot of bouncing curls, caught on the side with a tiny red rosette.

She looked about ten years younger.

She looked breathtakingly lovely.

Meg was gazing into the mirror as if she, too, hardly recognised herself. She met his reflected gaze and turned slowly to face him, and he thought if he hadnât caught her in this she might have fled and taken it off.

âItâsâ¦itâs silly,â she said.

âItâs lovely,â the shop assistant said definitely. âWeâve found two more that are just as pretty, only she wonât buy three. Sheâs reluctant to buy even this one, but I persuaded her to try it on again. With shoes.â

âWell done,â he said, walking closer. âI can see it needs shoes.â

âItâs silly,â Meg said again.

âItâs not,â William said, somehow managing to smile at the shop assistant without taking his eyes off Meg. âYou look lovely.â

She flushed. âI feel like something out of Hollywood.â

âGreat things come out of Hollywood. Weâll take it.â He still hadnât taken his eyes from her. âAnd the other two. Wrap the others. Sheâll leave this one on.â

âWilliamâ¦â

âSay âYes, Mr. McMasterâ.â

âNo!â

âYouâre intending to go to a classy restaurant wearing

overalls?â

âIâm not going to any classy restaurant.â Her new resolution hadnât included socialising. Sheâd have a sandwich on the run and then go back to the hospital. Then sheâd get through Christmas. Sheâd tell him her decision as she put him on the flight back to New York.

A withered spinster gazing adoringly after her bossâ¦ She hauled the conjured vision back into her head and held on to it.

Her decision was right, no matter how much it hurt. She had to move forward.

But he was still thinking restaurants. âOf course we need to go to a restaurant,â he said, sounding wounded. âIâve bought new clothes too, so weâre both dressed up. You like my chinos?â

He was smiling at her. Oh, that smileâ¦

âTheyâre fine, butâ¦â

âHey, I said youâre lovely.â

âOkay, youâre lovely too,â she muttered. âBut we donât need to match.â

âBetter that we donât, I think,â he said softly. âBut weâll buy the dresses anyway.â

CHAPTER EIGHT

MEG walked out of the shop feeling as if she were in a freeze-frame from a fifties movie. William put his hand in the small of her back to guide her through the crush of shoppers and the feeling of unreality deepened.

âDonât think about it,â he said, obviously sensing how self-conscious she felt. âThe crowds were looking when you were covered in blood. Theyâre still looking, but now theyâre smiling. Letâs concentrate on the important things. Like breakfast.â

Sheâd given up fighting. A sandwich on the run felt good, but anything would do. She was so hungry she was likely to keel over. If he had to take her to a restaurant, then so be it.

âYes, please,â she said, expecting him to take her into one of the small local restaurants. But instead he ushered her back into the carâhow did this man manage to get a park when the whole world was looking for a park today?âand she almost groaned. She wanted to eat *now*.

But sheâd worked for too long for this man to complain when meals took too long coming, so she stifled her groan and folded her hands in her lap and thought she looked ridiculous. She should be smiling and waving. But then they should be driving an expensive sports car instead of Lettyâs farm wagon. At least the silencer was fixed, she thought, and then she saw where they were going and she forgot about anything else.

He was driving up to the cliff above the town. He was taking her to the most expensive restaurant in the district.

Sheâd never been here.

âThis place isâ¦ Oh, itâs where you go to celebrate wedding anniversaries. When youâre rich. They donât do breakfast,â she breathed.

âThey do today. I rang them. I spoke to the chef personally. Bacon and eggs and fried bread and strawberries and fresh juice and sourdough toast and home-made butterâ¦ We had a long

discussion. Anything we want, we can have.â

âIf we pay.â

âIf I pay,â he said gently and he was out of the car, striding round to her side and handing her out as if she was one of his dates instead of Miss Jardine, his PA.

He never handed her out of his car. He opened doors for her, the natural courtesy of a polite man, but to walk around and help her out of the carâ¦ no. She was his employee and the extra cosseting was reserved forâ¦his women?

She no longer fitted either category, she thought, as she brushed past him and his touch made her feel even more as if this was not real, it was something out of a movie. The lines were blurring.

But if the lines were blurringâ¦ The question was huge and for some reason it was drumming in her headâinsistent, urgent. There was never going to be a good time to askâso why not now?

âWhoâs Elinor?â she asked, and he looked at her for a long moment and then smiled and shrugged and led her inside.

Maybe the lines were blurring for him too, she thought, and then she thought, all the more reason why her decision was the only possible one.

âIâll tell you over breakfast,â he said simply, and she knew she was right.

The restaurant was almost empty. This place started lunch at what it deemed a respectable hour and this didnât quite qualify. Maybe they wouldnât have taken his booking if he hadnâtâ¦thrown his credit card around? Thrown his name around?

âYouâll have the paparazzi in your face before you know it,â she said darkly and he shook his head.

âYou think the paparazzi has nothing better to do on Christmas Eve than take photos of me? Iâm low-key in the celebrity world.â

He was, she thought, but only because he created little stir. He didnât do the society thing. Even though his name was known worldwide, for the most part he deliberately kept away from cameras. He was seen in the celebrity magazines, stepping back into the shadows as his woman of the moment smiled and posed. If the women he escorted started to like the limelight too much, he moved on. Was this why she hadnât heard of Elinor

until now? Did the woman have sense enough to stay low profile?

She shouldnât have asked. She had no business asking.

She really wanted to know.

The head waiter was leading them to what must surely be the best table in the house, in an alcove which gave a semblance of privacy but where the view stretched away across the ocean, as far as the eye could see. There were windsurfers on the waves below them. Meg thought suddenly, how long had it been since sheâd swum?

Their farm was almost an hourâs drive from the sea. There was never any time to indulge in anything so frivolous. Maybe *when* she changed jobsâ¦

The thought was inexorably bleak.

âEggs and bacon and toast and fruit and juice and coffee,â William said to the waiter. âAny way you want to serve them, as long as it starts coming fast. Is that okay with you, Miss Jardine? â

Miss Jardine. It sounded wrong. Maybe it sounded wrong to William too, because he was frowning.

âYes. Wonderful,â she managed.

The waiter sailed off as if heâd just been given an order which was a triumph of creation all on its ownâhow much had William paid to get this table, to get a breakfast menu, to simply be here? To take his woman somewhere beautiful.

She was not his woman.

Neither was she Miss Jardine.

Deep breath. Just do it. âMr McMaster, this might not be the time to tell you, but I think I should,â she said and she faltered. Was she mad? Yes, she was. She knew it, but she still knew that she had no choice. âI need to resign.â

William had glanced out to sea as a windsurfer wiped out in spectacular fashion. He turned back to face her and his expression had stilled.

âResign?â

âIâll train my replacement,â she said hurriedly. âI wonât leave you without anyone. But youâre going back to the States anyway. If youâre gone for a couple for months Iâll have someone sorted before you return. Iâll work side by side with her

then for a couple of weeks until Iâm sure youâre happy, butâ¦â

âI hire my own PAs,â he snapped.

âSo you do. Then, please, you need to find my replacement.â

âCan I ask why?â

There was the question. A thousand answers crowded in but he was watching her faceâand this was Williamâ¦ No, this was W S McMasterâ¦and she knew him and he knew her and only honesty would do.

âThe work we doâ¦we need to travel side by side. We need to be totally dependent on each other but we need to stay detached. Todayâ¦ Up on the roof I got undetached.â

âMeaning?â

âMeaning I donât think of you as Mr McMaster any more. I think of you as the man who saved my grandma.â

His gaze didnât leave her face. âSo take a pay cut,â he said at last. âI donât see how abandoning me is showing your gratitude.â

âYou know what I mean.â

He did. She saw a flicker behind his eyes that might almost be read as pain if she didnât know how aloof this man was. How he stood apart.

âThereâs no need to leave.â

âI think there is.â

âYouâre under contract,â he snapped.

âNo.â She met his gaze calmly, hoping he couldnât guess the tumult behind her words. âMy contractâs up for renewal. It expires next month.â

âYouâre responsible for keeping contracts up to date.â

âSo I am. So I have. My contract expires. Itâs not to be renewed, so we move on.â

âSo you tell me now?â he snapped. âAnd you expect us to calmly go on sharing Christmas when you no longer work for me?â

She flinched, but there was no avoiding what needed to be said. She knew him well enough now to accept the only way forward was honesty.

âItâs the only way I can go on sharing Christmas,â she said simply. âFeeling the way I do.â

âFeelingâ¦â

âLike youâre not my boss any more.â

âThis is nonsense.â

âItâs not nonsense,â she said stubbornly. âIâm sorry but there it is. Iâve quit. If you want me to keep working until you get a replacementâ¦â

âThat means youâll still be working over Christmas.â

âIâm returning my Christmas bonus.â She glanced down at her dress. âIâll take these in the form of severance pay. You wonât be out of pocket.â

âWhat nonsense is this? You canât afford the grand gesture.â

âItâs not a grand gesture,â she said stiffly. âItâs what I need to do. I canât afford not to.â

âWhatâs that supposed to mean?â

âIt means not everythingâs about money.â She hesitated. âWhoâs Elinor?â she asked again and his brows snapped down in a sharp, dark line of anger.

âIs that what this is about?â

âYou mean am I, your PA, jealous of a woman called Elinor?â She managed a smile at that one. âOf course Iâm not. All Iâm saying is that the lines between personal and professional have been blurred. Last week I wouldnât have dared ask that questionâI wouldnât want to. However, suddenly I want to know why you never had a dog when you were a kid. I want to know how you learned to climb when you were a boy. And, yes, I do want to know about Elinor.â She hesitated. âMaybe this canât make sense to you, but a week ago I didnât mindâ¦that you seemed aloof and a bitâ¦unhappy.â

âIâm not unhappy,â he said, startled, and she thought about it. âOkay, not unhappy,â she conceded. âWrong word, but I donât know what the word is. Justâ¦holding yourself tight against the world, when letting the world in could make you happy.â

And he got it, just like that. âLike caring about Scott and Letty?â

âLike caring about Scott and Letty.â

âAnd if anything happens to them?â

âThen my world falls apart.â

âThen thatâs dumb. You canât afford to think like that.â

âWhy not? Thatâs all there is.â

âEmotional nonsense.â

âSo whoâs Elinor?â

âItâs none of your business.â

âItâs not,â she agreed. âAnd as my boss you can tell me to mind my own. As a casual acquaintance you can tell me that as well. But now Iâm your hostess for Christmas, and you saved my grandmaâs life. So I owe you and you owe me and I really want to know that thereâs someone in your life who can take that horrid, reserved look away from your face.â

He stared at her, nonplussed. She managed to meet his gaze and hold. This wasnât just about her, she thought. There was something she had to reachâ¦something it was important to reach.

Heâd saved Letty. She owed it to him to try.

But then breakfast arrived. The smell reached her before the meal, wafting across the room as a delicious, tantalising siren call. A couple of early lunch diners were being ushered to their tables. She saw their noses wrinkle with appreciation and she thoughtâmine, hands off.

She turned back to William, and the same thought flickered. *Mineâ¦* Only it was a stupid, stupid thought. It was why she had to get out.

Maybe she didnât want to know who Elinor was. Personal or not, boss orâ¦friend?â¦she didnât have the right.

But she wasnât retracting and her question hung.

And it seemed heâd decided to tell her. The meal was set before them and he started to talk even before he started to eat. There was anger beneath his words, an edge of darkness, but the words were coming out all the same.

âElinorâs a foster mother in Manhattan,â he said. âSheâs a lovely, warm Afro-American lady with a heart bigger than Texas. Sheâs old enough to retire but there are always children who need her. Right now sheâs fostering Ned and Pip. Two years ago she took them in while their mother supposedly undertook a court-ordered rehab, but instead she robbed a drug store, with violence. Sheâs been in prison ever since and she doesnât contact them; she treats them with complete indifference. Elinorâs trying to persuade her to give them up for adoption but she wonât. So Elinorâs the only mother they know.â

âAndâ¦you?â she asked, stunned.

âI met Elinor when I agreed to sponsor the Manhattan Foster-Friends programme. Itâs an organisation designed to give foster carers support, for people whoâd love to help but who only have limited time to give. So Elinor and the children have become myâ¦ Foster-Friends. Iâd promised to take them out for Christmas.â

âI see,â she whispered, and she did see. Sort of. So the image of a sleek, sterile Manhattan apartment wasnât right. Or maybe it was right; it was just that he moved out from it in a way she hadnât expected.

âSo what will they do now?â she asked, feeling dreadfulâfor Elinor, for Pip and Ned, and for William himself.

âElinor has said not to worry. Sheâll give them Christmas. They donât depend on me.â

âOh,â she said in a small voice.

âEat your breakfast, Meg,â he said gently and she turned her attention to her plate, though the enjoyment wasnât in it now. Or not so much.

It did, indeed, look wonderful. Pleasure laced with guilt.

âIâm sorry I didnât get you home,â she said.

âItâs not your fault. Eat.â

Eat. Sheâd almost forgotten she was hungry. Or maybe not. She was fickle, she thought, piercing an egg and watching the yolk ooze across the richly buttered toast. Mmm.

She glanced up and William was watching her and she thought, with a tiny frisson of something she was far too sensible to feelâ*Elinorâs a retirement age foster mother. And William cares about kids.*

But William only cared about these kids part-time. In the bits he had available. She knew he was out of the country eight months out of twelve.

The coldness settled backâthe bleak certainty that this man walked alone and would walk alone for ever. There was nothing she could do about it. Sheâd resigned. She didnât have to watch him self-destruct.

But maybe he was right. Maybe he wasnât self-destructingâmaybe it was she who was putting herself out there to be shot down with emotional pain.

The whole scenario was too hard. There was only one thing

to do here.

She looked back down at her eggâfirmlyâand concentratedâfirmlyâon her truly excellent breakfast.

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There wasnât a lot of conversation after that. After their third coffee William rang the hospital while Meg stared into the dregs of her cup. He put it onto speaker so Meg could hear the nurseâs response.

âSheâs still asleep. Yes, sheâs fine. I promise weâll ring you the moment she wakes.â

âSo letâs walk,â he decreed and Meg could only agree. She didnât want to go back to the hospital and wait. And think.

Think of what she was walking away from.

So they walked down to the beach, and Meg slipped off her sandals and headed for the shallows.

William watched her from further up on the sand. He kept his shoes on. Heâd swapped his boots for a pair of casual loafers but he wasnât taking the next step. W S McMaster with bare feet, walking in the shallows? Unthinkable.

She walked along, letting the last run of the waves lick over her toes, kicking sprays of water up in front of her.

William walked parallel to her but fifteen feet up the beach. She was in the shallows. He was on solid sand.

Solid sand?

There was no such thing, she thought. Nothing was solid. Everything was shifting.

Why wasnât he taking his shoes off? Why wasnât he coming close?

She knew why. She even agreed it was sensible that he shouldnât.

The wind was warm on her face. The sand and salt between her toes felt fabulous. All it needed was for William to take fifteen steps and take her hand and life would beâ¦

A fairy tale.

So get real, she told herself and kicked up a spray of water so high she soaked the front of her dress. This guy is a billionaire from Manhattanâmy ex-boss. Iâm unemployed, with a hundred dairy cows, a little brother and a grandma who needs me and

will need me for years.

She kicked the water again and glanced sideways at William.

He wasnât looking at her. He was striding along the beach as if he was there to walk off his too-big breakfast and that was that.

And why shouldnât it be that? The man hadnât been to the gym for two days. Heâd be suffering from withdrawal.

âYou go on by yourself,â she called to him. âBurn some energy. Iâm happy to stay here and kick water.â

He glanced at her and nodded, brisk, serious.

She turned to watch the windsurfers and he headed off along the beach. Alone.

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He was being a bore.

He didnât know what else to be.

There were a thousand emotions crowding into his head right now and he didnât know what to do with any of them.

She was beautiful. There was a really big part of him that wanted to head into the shallowsâwith or without shoesâand tug her to him and hold.

How selfish would that be?

She wasnât like any woman heâd dated. Heâd selected her with care as his Australian PA and that was what she was qualified to be. She was smart, efficient, unflappable. Loyal, honest, discreet. Sassy, funny, emotional.

Trusting and beautiful.

He didnât have a clue what to do with all these things. He moved in circles where women knew boundaries; indeed, they wanted them. He was an accessory, a guy with looks and money who was good for their image. No one had ever clung.

Meg wasnât clinging. The oppositeâshe was walking away.

That was good. She knew the boundaries. She knew theyâd overstepped them so she was protecting herself. She had the right.

And if he stepped over the boundaries after her, like walking into the water now and taking her hand, pretending they could just be a normal couple, boy and girlâ¦

He didnât do boy and girl. He had to leave; he knew no other

way of living.

Do not depend on anyone.

He could depend on Meg.

No. Sheâd resigned. The thought hurt. He tried to drum up anger but it wasnât there. All that was left was a sense of emptiness, as if heâd missed out on something other people had. How to change? If he triedâ¦ If he hurt herâ¦

He walked faster, striding along the hard sand, trying to drive away demons. He stopped and looked back, and Meg was a red and white splash of colour in the shallows, far behind.

In a day or two sheâd be further away. Sheâd get some sort of hick job and be stuck here, milking her cows. Taking care of Letty and Scott.

It was her choice.

He picked up a heap of seaweed and hurled it out into the shallows, as if itâd personally done him injury. That was what this felt like, but he couldnât fault Meg. She was protecting herself, as he protected his own barriers.

She had the right.

Heâd choose another PA and move on.

But firstâ¦he had to get Christmas over. Bring on Santa Claus, he thought grimly, followed by a plane out of here.

And then theyâd all live happily ever after?

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS a subdued trio who returned home. Letty was stretched out on the back seat, dozing. The doctors had been inclined to keep her; sheâd woken enough to be stubborn but she was sleeping now.

Meg sat in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead. As if she was enduring something that had to be endured.

Heâd made a few desultory attempts at conversation but had given up. So much for his smart, sassy PA. Now she was justâ¦Meg. Someone he once knew?

Just concentrate on driving, he told himself. When he got back to the farm heâd move onto evening milking. The phone line was working again so after milking he could use the Internet; keep himself busy.

âBy the way, Iâve organised your satellite connection,â he said and Meg cast him a glance that was almost scared.

âYou what?â

âWhile you were dress shopping. It only took me minutes to buy what I needed, and the Internet place was open for business. It seems satellite dishes make great Christmas gifts. Even I couldnât get them to erect it today, but first working day after Christmas itâll be here.â

âI canât affordâ¦â

âItâs paid for. Three years in advance.â

âNo, thank you,â she said in a tight, clipped voice. âThree dresses are enough.â

Butâ¦ âAre you out of your mind?â Letty was suddenly awake, piping up from the back seat in indignation. âMeg, what sort of gift horse are you looking in the mouth here? Scotty will love it. You know thereâll be times still when heâs stuck at home in pain. You canât say no to that.â

âLetty, Iâm no longer working for Mr McMaster,â Meg said. âSo I canât take expensive gifts.â

âYouâre not working for him?â

âSheâs resigned. Tell her sheâs daft,â William said.

âNo,â Letty said, surprisingly strongly. âMy Megâs not daft. If sheâs quit thereâs a good and sensible reason. But a satellite connectionâ¦thatâd be a gift to Scotty and me, not to Meg, wouldnât it, Mr McMaster?â

âWilliam,â he said and he almost snapped.

âWilliam,â Letty said. âScottâs friend. My friend. Meg, dear, William has more money than he knows what to do with, and heâs just given us a very fine Christmas gift in return for a bed for Christmas. Andâ¦â She hesitated, but she was a wise old bird, was Letty. âAnd you donât want anything in return, do you, Mr McMaster?â

âWilliam!â

âWilliam,â Letty said obediently. âBut youâre not buying Meg with this. She doesnât owe you anything, right?â

âRight,â he said and glanced across at Meg. Her face was drawn, almost as if she was in pain.

He hated that look. He didnât know what to do about it.

âThen I accept on Scottyâs behalf,â Letty said across his thoughts. âAnd your bed for Christmas is assured.â

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When theyâd left the farm it had been almost deserted. When they turned back into the driveway there were more than a dozen vehicles parked under the row of gums out front.

âUh-oh,â Letty said, peering dubiously out of the window. âThis looks like a funeral.â

âIf it hadnât been for William, it would have been,â Meg said, and once again William thought she sounded strained to breaking point. âIf Scottâs done something else stupidâ¦â

But it seemed he hadnât. When they pulled up, women emerged from the house, men appeared from the yard, kids appeared from everywhere.

âThey called a working bee,â Scott said, limping across to the car on his crutches and tugging open the back door to make sure for himself that his grandmother was in one piece. âThey said you had enough on your plate, Meg. And they knew youâd left the hay till after Christmas, so they brought slashers and theyâve

done three whole paddocks. Theyâre bringing in the last of it now.â

âYouâre kidding,â Meg whispered, but she was staring across to a hay shed which had stood almost empty this morning and now looked three-quarters full. âIn whatâfour hours?â

âWe can work when we want to.â It was Jenny, coming forward to give her friend a hug. âWe were thinking weâd help after Christmas but when this happened I said to Ian, why not now?â She cast a curious glance at William. âShe needs looking after, our Meg.â

âI do not,â Meg said, revolted.

âShe doesnât,â Scott said and Jenny grinned and hugged him as well until he turned scarlet in embarrassment.

âOkay, she doesnât. As long as you and Letty stop doing darn fool things when sheâs not around,â Jenny retorted.

âIâm going to be around,â Meg said. âIâll try and find a job locally. Iâ¦ I donât want to be away any more. But for nowâ¦thank you all so, so much. Iâm incredibly grateful. But I need to get Letty inside. She needs to sleep.â

âIâll carry her,â William said but one of the neighbours stepped forward and lifted Letty from the car before he could.

âWeâre local,â he said to William, quite kindly, but firmly for all that. âWe look after our own. Cows are on their way up now, Meg. You want some help with tonightâs milking?â

âYouâve done enough,â Meg said.

âThis guyâll help?â It seemed everyone was looking at William.

âHeâs promised to.â

âIs he any good?â

âAt milking? He has untapped potential,â Meg said and people laughed and gathered their kids and said their goodbyes and left.

Meg tucked Letty into bed and fussed over her. Scott limped over to the cow yard and William followed.

âWe should start,â Scott said.

William looked at the brace on Scottâs leg and said gently, âIs that okay? That you help with milking?â

âIt has to be. Iâm tired of waiting for it to heal.â

âSo itâs not okay.â

âMeg and Grandma fuss that if my leg gets kicked we have to

start over again. But Iâll be careful.â

âOr not. How about you supervise while I do the hands on?â William eyed the mass of cows pressing against the yard gate. He eyed the waiting bales. Nothing to this. Exceptâ¦Maybe you had to do stuff to the vat for pasteurisation orâ¦or something. He didnât want to waste a whole milking. âDo you know how this works?â

âCourse.â

âThen you give me instructions and leave me to it.â

âI can help.â Scott squared his shoulders. âI know I was dumb trying to put that Santa up. I never dreamed Grandmaâd try and fix it. But Iâm not completely helpless. This legâll soon be better. I can look after them.â

William looked into his drawn face. He saw reflected horror from this morningâs accident. He saw the unmistakable traces of years of pain and he saw tension, worry, the pain of being a kid without a dad, an adolescent trying desperately to be an adult.

âI know you can,â he said softly. âIf you must. But Iâm at a loose end right now, and it seems everything else is taken care of. So you sit on the fence and tell me your plans for your car restoration and in between plans you can tell me how to turn this milking machine on and let these girls get rid of their load.â

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Scotty must be exhausted. Meg arrived at the dairy, back in her milking gear, and one glance at her little brother told her he was close to the edge. Physically, he was still frail. This morning would have terrified him and, with all the neighbours here helping, his pride wouldnât have let him stop.

She wanted to grab him down from the fence, hug him and haul him off to bed. But he was talking to William, who appeared to be underneath a cow, and she knew that pride still played a part here.

âSo you two reckon you can run this place without me?â she enquired and William emerged from behind the cow and grinned.

âNothing to this milking game. Iâm about to add Milker to my CV.â

âHow is he, Scotty?â she asked and then corrected herself.

âSorry, Scott.â

âYou can still call me Scotty if you like,â her brother conceded. âIn private.â

âIn front of Williamâs not private.â

âNo, but heâs okay.â

That was a huge concession, Meg thought. Thereâd been a few guys in her pastâof course there hadâbut Scott had bristled at all of them. *Heâs okay*. Huge.

âJust because he bought you bits of carsâ¦â she managed, feeling choked up.

âNo, he really is okay. Is Grandma asleep?â

âAlmost,â she said and here was a way to let him off the hook without injuring any more of that fragile manly ego. âShe wants to say goodnight to you. Do you reckon you could stay with her while we milk? Iâm still a bit worried about her.â

âSure,â Scott said and slid off the fence and again she had to haul herself back from rushing forward to help. âWatch William with those cups, though. Four teats, four cups. Itâs taking him a bit of time to figure it out.â

âHey!â William said, sounding wounded, and Meg laughed and watched her little brother retreat and thought this was as good as it got.

But it was so fleeting. Tomorrow or the next day, William would be gone.

It was okay. This was the right thing to do. She had no choice but to resign. A PA, hopelessly devoted to her boss? That was pathetic and she knew it.

She glanced at him and thought, dumb or not, she was hopelessly devoted. She had no choice but to get as far from William as possible.

âHeâs a great kid,â William said and she flushed and started milking and didnât answer.

âYou donât agree?â he asked after sheâd cupped her first cow.

âOf course I agree.â

âBut youâre not talking.â

âItâs been a big day.â

âBut itâs normal again now,â he said gently. âThough itâs a shame you felt the need to change. I liked your dress.â

âIâll wear it again tomorrow.â She gathered her emotions and

told them firmly to behave. Two days max and heâd be gone. âTell me about Pip and Ned. Do you have Christmas gifts for them?â

âI do.â

âWhat?â

âBubble guns,â he said. âBattery powered. Ten bubbles a second and theyâre seriously big.â

âYou sound like you tried them out.â

âWhy wouldnât I?â

Whoaâ¦ The thought of W S McMaster with a bubble gunâ¦ âWhereabouts did you try them out?â

âOn my balcony. I sent bubbles over Central Park.â

She giggled. Then she remembered he was going home and she stopped giggling.

âMeg?â he said softly from behind a cow.

âYes?â

âReconsider.â

âQuitting?â

âYes.â

âNo.â

âWhy not?â

âNot negotiable,â she said. âBeing your assistant means being aloof.â

âYou were never aloof.â

âI was aloof in my head.â

âAnd youâre not now?â

âNo,â she said shortly. âCan we keep on milking?â

âOf course we can. As long as you keep on thinking about reconsidering.â

âI canât.â

âDonât think canât. Think of all the reasons why you just might can.â

âThatâs a crazy thing to say.â

âResigningâs a crazy thing to think.â

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Only of course she was right and it was non-negotiable. They both knew it.

They finished milking, they cleaned the yard, they worked in

tandem and mostly they worked in silence. Then they headed inside and ate the last of the trifle and bread and ham in that order because Letty and Scott were both deeply asleep and it didnât seem to matter what order they ate in.

William thought back to Christmas Eve meals heâd had as a child. Christmas had been an excuse for socializing, which meant huge parties of very drunk people. Because it was Christmas his parents had insisted he be part of it. At Christmas they had to pretend to be a family.

Hereâ¦for the past two days theyâd lived on Lettyâs vast trifle and chunks of the huge Christmas ham and fresh bread and butter, eating as they felt like it, and it had feltâ¦ okay. Sensible. Delicious, even. But notâ¦right?

The world seemed out of kilter somehow, William thought as he washed the dinner dishes and Meg wiped beside him. It felt so domestic, and domestic was something heâd never felt. Doing the washing-up with his PA was weird. All of today had been weird.

Heâd lost his PA.

Heâd lost Meg.

âWe have the Internet back on,â Meg said as she put away the last plate. âThereâs a phone connection in the atticâI use the attic as an office when itâs not a spare bedroomâso you can catch up on the outside world before you go to sleep.â

âAnd you?â

âIâm checking on Millicent and then Iâm going to bed. Christmas or not, itâs still a five a.m. start. Goodnight, William.â

âDo you want help with Millicent?â

âSheâs not looking much different to this morning. I doubt if anythingâs happening tonight. Goodnight,â she said again, and she took the torch and headed out through the back door. The day was ended.

Heâd check the Internet. Heâd see what was happening with air traffic. He hadnât even checked today; maybe it was resolved.

Maybe he could leave.

Meg had already left.

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Maybe things *were* happening tonight. Sheâd started again. Millicent was back to being uncomfortable, or more than

uncomfortable, Meg thought. Her tail was constantly high, her back was arched and her eyes told Meg that she was in pain.

âHey, itâs okay,â Meg told her, fondling her behind the ears, scratching her, letting her rub her big head against her chest. This cow had been raised as a pet. She was a big sook and Letty loved her.

A normal dairy farmer would go to bed now, set the alarm and check her in a couple of hours. But, when she stepped back, Millicentâs eyes widened in fear. Meg sighed and went back to the house and fetched a folding chair, a lantern, a book and a rug.

âHappy Christmas,â she told Millicent as she settled down to wait. âYou and me and hopefully a baby for Christmas. We should do this in a manger. Or, at the very least, at the bottom of the haystack.â

But Millicent wasnât going anywhere. Trying to move her now would only add to her distress and the night was warm enough.

âWho needs a manger, anyway?â Meg muttered and glanced upward to where a thousand stars glittered in the clear night sky. âThis is where babies should be born. So get on with it.â

Millicent rolled her eyes.

âI know, sweetheart, itâs hard,â Meg said. âOr I donât actually know. Iâve heard itâs hard. You should have its daddy holding your hoof.â

She was being ridiculous.

She was thinking of William. The book sheâd brought out to read was a romance. She and William. Having a baby. William coaching her throughâ¦

âWell, pigs might fly,â she muttered and tossed her romance aside and snuggled under her blanket. âWeâre two single ladies, Millicent, and we need to get on with it together. You do your bit and Iâll do mine.â

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Thereâd been a last minute offer to the air traffic controllers. The union officials had deemed it worth considering and had sent out urgent contact to its members. Because this was Christmas theyâd vote online. If enough members voted by midnight, planes could start flying as soon as tomorrow morning.

Great. He might get home almost by Christmas, he thought. Heâd gain a day flying from Australia to the States. If he left on Christmas Day, then heâd arrive on Christmas Day.

He could give Ned and Pip their gifts. He could see them again; take them out to dinner, maybe. Leaving Meg?

She was his employee. His ex-employee. So what was the problem leaving her?

No problem at all.

He intended to help with milking at five. He needed to go to sleep.

He lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and thought ofâ¦

Meg.

He thought of Meg for a long time. He tried to think of anything but Meg but she was superimposed, like a veil through which he saw everything else.

Or maybeâ¦maybe everything in his life was a veil and Meg was behind. The only substantial thing.

What sort of crazy thinking was this? Where was the logic? Furious with himself, he threw off his covers and paced over to the attic window.

Two oâclock. The stars were amazing.

There was a light in the paddock beside the dairy. A faint light from a lantern. Someone was beside it.

Millicent? Was she calving?

Meg would be down there, making sure things were okay.

What business was it of his? He didnât know the first thing about birthing calves. Heâd be no help at all.

But, now he knew she was there, doing nothing was impossible. Heâd help if he could, he thought grimly, and then heâd leave.

He tugged on his overalls and headed downstairs.

What sort of life was this? Meg had been awake since five this morning. Sheâd be asleep on her feet, he thought as he made his way across the yard towards the lantern, but then he thought of all the times heâd demanded she stay up late, that she be awake for an early flight, that she continue until the work was done.

That was different. She was Miss Jardine then. He paid her to work when he worked.

He had three PAs. He thought of them now, and thought how

hard did he work them? They never complained.

He paid them not to complain.

But, for the first time, he felt a niggle of guilt. He treated his employees fairly; he made it clear at the outset what he expected and he paid well. He had a loyal and long-serving staff because of it. But his demand that they stay impersonalâ¦

His PAs told him what he needed to know about his staff. But his PAs themselvesâ¦ Miss Darling, Mrs Abraham, Miss OâConnell? Heâd have to look up their staff profiles to find out what their family background was.

What was happening to him? His staff were turning into people. And you got attached to people. *Do not get attached to people you pay.*

Meg was messing with his head, that was what it was. The sooner he was out of here, the better.

Only she was in trouble. As he neared, he could seeâ¦

Millicent was down, flat on her side, her body arched and her neck stretched up as if straining to the limit.

Megâ¦yes, it was Megâ¦was lying behind her, a dark shadow behind the light. He could see a mat laid out to the side, a couple of buckets, rags, ropesâ¦

âProblem?â he asked as he came up beside her and she didnât react. He looked more closelyâand discovered why she didnât react. She was hardly in a position to concentrate on anything but the cow.

What was she doing?

âWhatâs happening?â he asked, squatting beside her.

âDystocia,â she said, gasping. âI canât.â

She was lying flat, hard against Millicentâs rear. Her armâ¦

âDystocia?â

âBirth problems.â She sounded as if sheâd been running. âFirst calf. Bull was too big and now this. I knew it. I canâtâ¦â

âWhat canât you do?â he said, feeling helpless. Heâd never seen a birth. He never wanted to see a birth.

Obviously, he was going to see this one.

Or more than see. âMaybe you can help,â she gasped, and he thought maybe he should head back to his nice safe attic right now. Only a coward would run.

He surely felt like a coward.

âYouâre stronger than I am,â she gasped and he thought, uh oh.

âCan we call the vet?â

âHeâs away until after Christmas. He warned us.â

âSurely thereâs more than one vet.â He was taking in the whole scene now and, as he did, Millicent strained. Her whole body heaved and Meg moaned, and moaned again.

âWhat are you doing?â

âI canâtâ¦â She gasped, not able to continue until the contractions subsided. Thenâ¦ âYes, we need a vet but we only have one locally. And the calfâs legâs tucked backward instead of forward, meaning thereâs a ridge of shoulder stopping the birth. So I need to get the head back in the birth canal so thereâs room to turn it. But I canât. I donât have the strength.â She pushed and pushed againâand then seemed to make a decision. Her arm was suddenly free. She dunked it in the nearest bucket and looked up to him. âCan you?â

âCan I what?â

âPush the head back far enough so you can get the leg forward.â

He felt as if someone had punched him. Milking was one thing, but this? âYou want me toâ¦â

âIâm not strong enough,â she said simply. âPlease.â

âYou think Iâ¦â

She wasnât listening. âRip your shirt offâitâll be ruined. Shove your arm into the disinfectant and Iâll lubricate it. Hurry, before the next contraction.â

âYou want me toâ¦â

âJust do it,â she snapped and he was hauling his shirt off, thinkingâ¦thinkingâ¦nothing.

He dunked his arm in disinfectant. Meg wiped it and then started lathering him with some sort of jelly. He felt too winded to object.

âLie flat,â she told him. âIf a contraction hits, donât try to do anything except stop the head coming further forward. But the foreleg on the right is lying back instead of hoof-forward. You need to push the head back far enough so you have space to feel the foreleg and tug it forward. Thereâs no way she can get the calf out with it back.â

âI have no idea how to do that.â

âSimple,â she snapped. âCows have two forelegs. To calf they both need to be forward with the head between. So you pull a leg forward.â

âHow do I know what everything is?â

She wasnât listening to his panic. She was intent only on instructions. âItâs not brain surgery. A hoofâs easy to feel. Think about it. Think what youâre looking for and then find it. Gentle as you canâdo no damageâbut you have to move fast. Before the next contraction. Go.â

So he lay full length on the grass and he did the unthinkable. To his astonishment, he could feelâ¦ What? He could feel the head. He could feel one small hoof on the left.

He needed the matching one.

Another contraction rippled through and he discovered why Meg had moaned. He almost moaned himself.

âDonât try and do anything during the contraction. Just hold it,â she snapped from above him and he held with all the strength he had and he knew that if he hadnât been holding the head would be emerging.

With one hoof and not the other.

So he held and finally, blessedly, the contraction eased.

âNow push,â Meg said urgently. âAll the force you can. You need to get it back.â

He didnât need to be told. He pushed, gently at first and then, as his grip tightened, as he became more sure of what he was holding, he pushed with more force. Then he pushed with all his strength.

The head movedâ¦and then moreâ¦

âNow.â Meg would have seen by his arm that the head had shifted. âBefore the next contraction. Find the leg.â

He had to loosen his grip on the head, slide his fingers to the sideâ¦ It was so tightâ¦.

But there it was, a bony joint, surely the leg. He felt along it, conscious of the need for speedâ¦

He had it, hooked by two fingers, and he was tugging it forward.

âCareful not to rip anything,â Meg said urgently. âTake care.â

Another contraction. He felt it coming, released the leg, held the head. Just held.

Then, as the contraction eased, he moved again, only this time he knew what he was looking for.

He had it. He pulled, hard, hoping he wasnât doing more harm than good, but the limb was slithering round, shifting, and there seemed to be roomâ¦

He had it!

âItâs round,â he muttered and Megâs hand was on his shoulder, pressing him in a move of exultation. She was lying against him, full length on the dirt. âAligned?â

He knew what she meant and he could feel it. He had two neat hooves with the head between.

âYes. Hereâs anotherâ¦.â

âLet it come,â she said. âItâll come now.â

And it did, the next contraction shoving everything forward. Two hooves were out, and Meg was fastening them before the head appeared, tying them carefully with some sort of soft rope.

âWhatâ¦â

âJust in case we need to help her,â she said. âSheâs been straining for too long already and this calf is big. Iâll loop this above and below the fetlock so we can pull without doing damage.â

âWhere did you learn to do this?â he demanded, dazed, and he felt her smile rather than saw it.

âYou mean why wasnât it on my CV? I canât think why I didnât include it. Here we go.â

Another contraction. Meg let it pass but the head didnât emerge.

âOkay, letâs give her a hand,â she said. âCan you take the rope? Tug with the contraction, not too hard, not enough to hurt the calf, Iâm happy with an inch or two at a time.â

He nodded. Megâs hands were lubricated again. She was feelingâ¦

âNow,â she said and he tugged.

A little further.

âMan, this headâs big,â Meg said. âWith the size of this brain, you must be having the smartest baby on the planet, Millicent. Heâll take a lot of knitting for a baby bonnet.â

Her voice was low and even and, with a sense of shock, William realised that, even though most of Megâs attention was on the calf, there was solid affection and worry for the cow as

well.

Sheâd given her heart to a cow? How nuts was that? Where was his clinically efficient, unemotional PA now?

Gone. And the sense of loss was gut-wrenching.

âNow,â she said again, and then moaned because her hand was cupping the head, shoehorning it, and William was tugging on the hooves and there was only so much roomâ¦

âKeep going,â she managed as the contraction lengthened and he tugged some more, slowly, insistently and suddenly the head was there, the rope was no longer needed, the calf was half out.

Millicent gave a long bovine moan and Meg cleared membrane from the tiny nose and then laid her hand on Millicentâs flank.

âNearly there, girl. One more push. You can do it.â

One more contraction and the thing was done. The calf slithered out into the lantern light, a long wet bundle of spindly legs and black nose and rag-like tail. Meg cried out in delight and checked its nose was still clear and then lifted it around a little so Millicent could reach her baby with ease.

And she did. She turned and nosed her baby and she started to lick it clean. And William looked at Meg and saw her eyes were filled with tears and a man would have to be inhuman not to be moved. Not to take her into his armsâ¦

Millicent had taken over, licking her calf with solid maternal ownership. Meg shifted away and her body collided with Williamâsâand she didnât move any further.

Heâd slipped the loop from the calfâs hooves. Heâd done all he could. Meg had done all she could. Their calf was alive and wellâand Meg was hard against him.

Heâd helped birth a calf. He and Meg. The feeling was awesome.

They were still half lying on the ground, and Meg was warm and beautiful, stained, filthy, her face tracked with tearsâ¦

She was trembling, her body reacting to the combined terrors of this day. How could he bear her trembling? How could he bear not to put his arms round her and tug her closer? So he did and, as he felt her yield, he tugged her closer still. Her hair brushed his face and he kissed the top of her head, just lightly, no pressure, nothing.

The awe from the birth was all around themâthe stars, the warmth of the night, the feeling that a miracle had happened. New lifeâ¦ Did she feel this every time she delivered a calf? he wondered, but then he forgot to think more because she was turning in his arms and she was looking straight at him, her eyes huge and shadowed, vaguely troubled, but neverthelessâ¦sure.

Sure that heâd kiss her. Sure that she wanted him to kiss her. He knew it and it was one more thing to add to the glory of this nightâor maybe the whole night had been building to this kiss.

Maybe his whole life had been building to this kiss.

That was a crazy thing to thinkâbut how could he think it was crazy when his hands were cupping her face and he was drawing her in to meet him? How could he think he was crazy when his mouth was lowering to hers and she was so sweet, so beautiful, so right?

She melted in to him, her mouth seeking his, her hands taking his shoulders so she could centre herself, be centred. Her need was as great as his. He could feel it in the urgency of her hold, in the fire he felt the moment he found her mouth.

She wanted him. He felt her need and his whole body responded. Their kiss was suddenly urgent, hard, demanding. It was as if a magnetic field had been created, locking them to each other, two force fields meeting as they must, with fire at the centre.

He wanted her. He wanted her fiercely, with a passion that rocked him. He feltâ¦out of control.

Maybe he was out of control. It was Christmas Eve. He was in the centre of a paddock somewhere in Australiaâhe didnât truly know whereâwith a woman heâd thought he knew but he now realised he hadnât known at all.

His Meg.

No. Just Meg. Her own beautiful self.

He deepened the kiss and she responded with heat and need, her lips opening, her tongue searching. Oh, but he wanted herâ¦ His hands were on her breasts, but she was wearing overalls. How did you get through overalls?

She was buttoned to the throat. No. Not buttons. Studs. They unfastened with satisfactory pops. Underneath the overalls was a lacy bra, and underneath the braâ¦ His breath drew in, with awe and wonder.

His hands were cupping her, and heâd never felt such beauty. Heâd never wanted a woman so much as he wanted Meg right now.

No woman before had been Meg.

He rolled back with her and she came, smiling down into his eyes. They were lying full length, wanting each other with a desperate heat they could read in each otherâs eyes.

She was above him, smiling in the moonlight. Meg, his beauty. Her skin was pale and luminous, she almost seemed to shine.

They were on a horse rug or somesuch, something sheâd spread in the middle of a cow paddock. No pillowed bed could feel better. No bed could feel more right.

âYouâre not taking your overalls off,â she whispered and he realised with a shock that she was laughing. âNot fair.â

His overalls were all in one. Heâd pulled them on in a rush. Underneathâ¦ Well, there wouldnât be a lot of finesse in his undressing.

âYouâre wearing a bra,â he managed. âI donât believe Iâm wearing anything.â

Her chuckle was so sexy it took his breath away. âI think thatâs good.â

âYou donât want me out of my overalls,â he said but he couldnât say it with any degree of certainty. This nightâ¦anything was possible this night.

âAnd if I do?â

There was a statement to take his breath away. But a man had to have sense, even if finding it almost tore him in two. âIâm notâ¦â Hell, it was so hard to get his voice to work. âIâm not carrying condoms.â

She paused at that. She stilled. He kissed her again, a gentle, wondrous exploration that left him wanting more. Much more.

Why hadnât he thought of condoms? Of all the stupidâ¦He didnât even have them in his bag back at the house.

Heâd hardly packed thinking he was about to seduce his PA.

And Meg was tugging away, propping herself up on her arms, considering him in the dim light. âHow bigâs your head?â she asked and he blinked.

âPardon?â

âMillicent operated with no condoms,â she said, her voice

husky and shaken. âLook what happened to her.â

He laughed, but it was a shaken laugh. He pulled away a little, sense returning. A little.

âWe canât,â he managed. âUnless Santa arrives right now.â

âI didnât put condoms on my Santa list,â she whispered, her voice laced with a thousand regrets.

âThatâs not efficient of you.â

âIâm not feeling efficient.â

âYou donât look efficient,â he said and he tugged her to him again and held. He just held. âMy obstetrician extraordinaire.â

âHey, you turned the leg. Maybe youâve found your new calling.â

âIâm not ready for a new career. If itâs all the same to you, I think Iâll stick to the old one,â he said. But, the moment he said it, he knew it was a mistake.

Or maybe it wasnât a mistake. Maybe it was simply the truth, which had to be put out there.

It had killed the moment. Meg moved back, squatted back on her heels and looked at him for a long moment, as if searching his face. And, whatever she was looking for, she didnât find it. She smiled again, a wry little smile with all the regret in the world, and she tugged her overalls up to decency.

âWell, that was fun,â she said and suddenly he had Miss Jardine backâclinical, cool, ready to move on. âBirth does crazy things to your head. Imagine how Iâd feel if ever I was around a human birth. Lucky Iâm not. But enough. Itâs three hours till milking. I need some sleep.â

âMegâ¦â

âNo,â she said.

âNo?â

âNo.â She met his gaze, calm and cool in the moonlight, and if there was bleakness behind it there wasnât anything he could do about it. âThis was moon madness. We both know it, and it bears out my decision that I need to quit. What if thereâd been a condom round tonight? Weâd have been lost.â

Lost. The word hung between them, loaded with too many meanings.

âWill you help me pack up?â she said. âMillicent will be fine for whatâs left of the night. Itâs lovely and warm. She has a fine

heifer calf to clean and sheâll do it better without us.â

âHeifer?â

âA little girl. I think weâll call her Milly. Millicent, mother of Milly. It has a fine ring to it, donât you think?â

She was talking for the sake of talking, he realised. She was putting emotion aside.

âI donât want to leave you,â he said simply and she looked at him for a long moment, considering, and then she shook her head.

âYou canât take me with you. I donât fit. I did when my role was PA. No more. Somehow weâve messed this and all there is now is for us to get on with our lives. Youâve got Ned and Pip and Elinor waiting for you back in New York, and you have your life there. I have a grandma and a little brother, and dairy cows and dogs and one brand new calf. Thatâs enough to keep any girl happy.â

âIs it?â

âYes,â she said, rising and dumping ropes into buckets. âYes, it is. Yes, it must be.â

CHAPTER TEN

WILLIAM woke to an operatic soprano belting out *Silent Night* right underneath his attic. Letty was singing along, almost louder than the soprano. A couple of dogs were joining right in.

Five-thirty. Heâd been in bed for whatâtwo and a half hoursâand heâd lain awake for at least one of them.

He groaned and put his pillow over his head and then Scotty started singing too, and more dogs joined in, full howl.

Christmas. Hooray.

Feeling more like Scrooge every minute, he hauled his jeans on and staggered downstairs. The kitchen table was groaning with food in various states of preparation. Letty was wearing a truly astonishing crimson robe and a Santa hat. Scotty was sitting in his pyjamas, shelling peas. The difference between now and yesterday was astonishing.

âHappy Christmas,â Letty said, beaming. âGreat pecs.â Then, as he tried to figure whether to blush, she motioned to the sound system in the corner where, mercifully, *Silent Night* had just come to an end. âMy favourite carol. You want us to play it again?â

âSheâll make you sing,â Scotty warned and William looked at the pair of them and saw exactly why Meg loved them to bits. A blushing adolescent and an old lady with her arm bandaged to her elbow, a lady who had almost died yesterday, who was now stirring something vaguely alcoholic, or possibly more than vaguely.

âEggnog,â Letty said, following his gaze. âJust on finished. You want first glass?â

âAt five-thirty in the morning?â

âYeah, itâs late,â Letty said. âMegâs already milking, without her eggnog. You want to take some over to her?â

âNo,â he said, revolted.

âWhatâs wrong with my eggnog?â

âIf Iâm going to help her milk, I need to be able to count teats.â

âHe has trouble getting to four, Grandma,â Scotty said kindly. âWeâd better let him off eggnog till the girls are milked.â He hesitated. âYou will help milk, wonât you? Meg said you helped so much last night that she wouldnât wake you, but sheâll be ages alone.â

âI could help,â Letty said darkly. âOnly she wonât let me.â

âWith your arm? Youâre as dodgy as I am,â Scott retorted and once again William was hit with the sensation that he was on the outside, looking in. Family?

âOkay, toast and coffee and no eggnog until afterwards, but thereâs home-made raspberry jam,â Letty told him, moving right on. âAnd real butter. None of that cholesterol-reducing muck this morning.â

âGrandmaâ¦â Scott said and Letty grimaced and held up her hands in surrender.

âI know. Back to being good tomorrow. You neednât worry, young man; I intend to be around to boss you for a long time to come.â

âSo no more Santa rescues.â

âIâll be good,â she said and William saw a flash of remembered terror from yesterday and he thought she wasnât as tough as she was making out. She was brave, though. And he saw Scott worrying about her and he thought that courage came in all guises.

They were all brave. And Megâ¦ What sheâd been trying to do for all of them since her parentsâ deathâ¦

âSo you know about Millicentâs calf,â he ventured, feeling really off centre, and they both grinned, happiness returning.

âOf course we do,â Scott said. âSheâs gorgeous. And Meg said you got a backward hoof out. I wish sheâd called me. I couldâve have helped.â

âThereâll be lots of calves for you to help in the future,â Letty said roundly. âWeâll get *your* leg right first. Weâre just lucky William was able to help. Weâre very pleased to have you here,â she said to William. âNow, Meg checked the news before she milked and she says the planes are running again. She and Scott checked flights and there are some available. She said to tell you when you woke up. But you donât want to leave yet, do you?â

âIâ¦â

Did he want to leave? They were looking at him expectantly.

Over in the dairy, Meg was milking, alone.

His world was twisting, as if it was trying to turn him in a direction he hadnât a clue about.

âI do need to go,â he said at last and it was as if the words were dragged out of him. âIf I help with the milking now, Scott, would you mind making me a list of flights and times?â

âToday?â âYes, please.â

âYou really want to leave?â Scott demanded incredulously, and William thought about last night, thought about holding Meg. Thought about holding Meg again.

If he got any closerâ¦

If Letty had fallen yesterdayâ¦ If Scotty had been killed in that accidentâ¦

If anything happened to Megâ¦

Do not get close. Do not open yourself to that sort of pain.

âI donât want to go,â he said, striving not to let his voice sound heavy. âHow could I want to leave Lettyâs eggnog? But I do need to get back to Manhattan as soon as possible. So please let me know which flight might be available.â

âOkay,â Scotty said and, even if the kid did sound disappointed, William couldnât let that stand in the way of a decision that must be made.

He headed back upstairs to dress and, as he did, Letty adjusted the sound system. Next on the playlist was *Deck the Halls* and she turned the sound up even louder.

This place was crazy.

Of course he had to get out of here.

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Meg was milking, head down behind a cow. When he reached the yard she didnât emerge, just kept on doing what she was doing. Killer and the rest of the dog pack greeted him with pleasure but there wasnât a lot of pleasure emanating from Meg.

That had to be okay by him. Maybe it was even sensible. He ushered the next cow into a bale and started doing what had to be done. He was getting good at this. Where could he use this new skill when he left?

Would he ever milk a cow again?

âHappy Christmas,â Meg said at last from behind her cow and

he thought she sounded exhausted. Had she slept at all?

He wanted to tell her to go back to bed, that heâd take over. He couldnât. Yes, heâd learned new skills but he couldnât milk by himself yet.

If he left todayâ¦ Would she be milking the cows alone?

âHappy Christmas,â he replied at last. Cautiously.

âThe airlines are back. Iâm sorry but I didnât have time to check flights before milking.â

âNot good enough,â he growled, trying for a smile, but she stiffened and said nothing.

âI was joking.â

âI know.â

âIâm sorry,â he said. âBad joke.â

âIâm sorry too,â she said, straightening and heading out to fetch another cow in. âLast nightâ¦it should never have happened. It was likeâ¦ Iâd been so worried. It was reaction; nothing more.â

âIt felt like more.â

âWell, it wasnât,â she snapped. âFortunately, the airlines are operating. Weâll see if we can get you a flight out tonight.â

âWhat about milking?â

âWhat about milking?â

âWhoâs going to do it?â

âI will,â she said. âIâve done it alone plenty of times before. It just takes longer.â

âYouâre exhausted already.â

âKerrieâs back tomorrowâsheâs coming for lunch today so maybe she can even help tonightâand I can sleep in the middle of the day.â

âAnd then you need to job hunt.â

âI believe Iâm still employed by you until my contract expires.â

âSo you are.â

âSo Iâll keep the office operating here as my contract specifies. Thatâll give me time to find something else.â

They were being absurdly formal, he thought, but maybe formal was the only thing to be.

âWhat sort of job do you want?â he asked.

âIâm a qualified accountant.â

âYouâll do accountancy in a provincial city?â

âWhatâs wrong with that?â

âWhat a waste.â

She didnât bother responding. She just kept right on milking.

âYou donât need to keep the office operating,â he said at last.

âYou canât dismiss me without notice.â

âIâm not dismissing you. Iâll pay you till the end of your contract.â

âThen Iâll work till the end of my contract. Iâve taken enough from you. I canât take any more.â

âIâd like to give more.â

âLike what?â she said from behind her cow and he thought about it. What would he like to give her?

Money. Security. The knowledge that she wouldnât have to get up to milk a cow unless she wanted to.

The ability to drop everything and be with Scott when and if he needed further operations. The ability to care for Letty as she needed to be cared for. Financial freedom to call the vet whenever she needed the vet.

Freedom to have a bit of fun.

But this was nothing he could do. Heâd given Scott his old cars. Heâd given Meg dresses and heâd given them all the satellite dish. He knew without asking that sheâd accept nothing else.

So there was nothing more he could do. There was nothing more he should do. As soon as his flight was confirmed, he could walk away and not look back.

That was what he wanted, wasnât it? Anything else was way too complicated.

Dogs. Cows.

Family.

âWeâd best get a move on,â she said across his thoughts. âWe donât do Santa until the cows are done and then thereâs church and then thereâs eggnog.â

âYou donât do eggnog until after Santa and church?â

âNot very much,â she said and managed a smile. âGrandma doesnât tip up the brandy bottle until weâre all safe home.â

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Milking finished, William swished the dairy while Meg went to check on Millicent and the brand new Milly. They were standing contentedly in the home paddock, Milly at her motherâs teat, no sign of the trauma associated with her birth.

If she was a hard-headed businesswoman, sheâd remove the calf now, Meg thought ruefully as she looked down at the pretty little calf. After the first few hours, when the calf had taken the all important colostrum, efficient dairy practice was to remove the calf and get the cow straight into mass production.

Only neither Letty nor Meg were hard-headed. The calves stayed with their mothers until Letty decreed they were ready to be independent, which lost them milk production but probably made them a healthier herd. Or possibly made them a healthier herd. Or not.

It was a decision of the heart, not of the head.

âLike me stopping working for William,â she told Millicent and sat on the edge of the trough while she watched the cow and her new little calf. Killer nosed up beside her and shoved his head against her ribs. She hugged him tight and suddenly she felt like crying.

âAnd thatâs also dumb,â she told Killer. âWhy cry? For that matter, why quit? Working for the McMaster empireâs the best job Iâve ever had. Why canât I keep on doing it? Why canât I ignore how I feel about him and get on with it?â

She knew she couldnât.

He was watching her. He was sluicing the yard but she could feel his gaze. She hugged her dog hard, then straightened her shoulders and rose and tried to look professional, as if she was examining cow and calf as a proper dairy farmer should. In terms of what she could make from them.

Millicentâs eyes were huge and contented and maybe a little bit wondrous. While Meg watched, she started to lick her calf and the little calf kept right on feeding.

Drat, those tears kept right on welling.

âHappy Christmas, you great sook,â she told herself angrily and swiped at her cheeks with venom. âGet a grip. And stop crying right now.â

She had to stop crying. William was finished in the yard. She should wait for him and walk him back to the house.

He was helping her. Itâd be only civil to walk back.

But the feeling of that kiss of the night before was too huge, too raw, too real. It was threatening to overwhelm her.

âIf I head back now I get first shower,â she told Killer. âThatâs what a hard-headed, professional dairy farmer should do. And thatâs what I am.â

Right.

âGo fast before he catches up.â

Even more right. Or not.

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Heâd never seen a Christmas tree like it.

Theyâd been so busy, William had hardly been in the sitting room until now, but after a second breakfast and a little eggnogâyes, the serious stuff would come after churchâLetty bossed them into the sitting room for present opening.

The tree was real but it wasnât pine. âThere are no pines here and thereâs no way Iâm spending money importing one,â Letty growled, following his gaze. âThis might not be what youâre used to, but itâs okay with us.â

It was a small gum tree in a vast pot on wheels. âWe pull it in and pull it out every year,â Letty said while Meg said nothing. âThis yearâs the last for this tree; sheâs getting too big. Weâll plant her out but thereâs already a new one coming on to take her place.â

And that made him feel weird as well. The thought of such continuity. A long line of trees, each taking its turn as a Christmas tree before growing to be one of the huge gums that surrounded the farm. Fantastic. And sort ofâ¦grounded. Good.

The decorations were great as well, all home-made, some wonderful, some distinctly corny.

âThey date from the time Meg arrived here,â Letty said proudly. âShe made paper chains, her mum made the balls and lanterns, then Scotty came along and hereâs his kindergarten thingsâ¦â

âGrandmaâ¦â Scott said, revolted, and Letty chuckled and tossed him a gift.

It was a sweater. Home knitted. Scott made a truly manful effort to look pleased and the hug he gave his grandma was genuine. He put it on. Red and green stripes. Just the thingâ¦

âFor winter,â he said, and Letty beamed with pleasure.

Meg said, âBut take it off before you faint in the heat.â

Scott threw his sister a look of such gratitude that William had trouble not to laugh out loud. As he did with so many of the gifts they were opening, small jokes, trivia, fun.

And then there was a gift in his hands. He stared down at the boxâsmall, flat, red and tied with gold ribbon.

âYouâve done enough for us,â Meg said softly. âWe canât possibly repay you, but this is the least we can do.â

He opened the box, feeling disoriented, as if heâd been transported to another world. Inside was a certificate, folded neatly.

He read through, trying to make it out.

Heâd been givenâ¦a part-time dog?

âScott and I found it on the Internet,â Meg said as he looked up, astounded. âItâs an animal shelter in Manhattan, and itâs not far from where you live. This gives you visiting rights. More. What you do is adopt a dog whenever youâre in town. If youâre based in New York for three months, then you take a dog for three months. You can take her back to the shelter at night if you want, or you can keep her at home, or you can simply take her out for a run each day. Whatever you want. You give your time and the shelter takes over what you canât provide. The only stipulation is that sheâs still available for permanent adoption. This plan means the shelter can take far more dogs than they could otherwise care for, and they donât have to put them down. But if someone wants to adopt one permanently, then you need to choose another.â

A part-time dog, he thought. Like Ned and Pip and Elinor. His part-time family. Good. Excellent.

So why did it make him feel empty?

Luckily, Scott was filling his silence. âThe dog youâve semi-adopted is Sheeba,â he told William. âHer photographâs in the bottom of the box. Sheâs part greyhound, part Dalmatian. I reckon she should be your first.â

âBecause every man needs a dog,â Letty said solidly.

William glanced out towards the kitchen. The dogs werenât permitted in the sitting room. There were five dogs squashed in the doorway, each nose managing to claim an inch of sitting room carpet.

Every man should have a dog. A part-time dog.

He watched as Meg opened yet another extraordinary knitted object and hugged Letty and giggled, and then watched as Scott and Letty were both ordered to open their gifts from Meg together, so they did, and they were bazooka-like machine guns loaded with foam balls. Christmas immediately became a running battle between grandmother and grandson. Whoâd have thought Letty had been close to death yesterday, and whoâd have ever thought of giving a grandmother a foam ball-shooter?

He looked at Meg and Meg was giggling like a kidâand he thought he was never going to see her again.

He started gathering wrapping paper, and then Letty remembered the turkey and Scott remembered flights.

âOh, whoops, sorry,â he said, firing a foam ball at Killer, who caught it neatly in his mouth, bit it in two and then looked expectantly for more. âKiller!â

âSorry, what?â

âYour flights.â He looked to Meg, as if to confirm he was doing the right thing. âI checked while you were milking. If you really want to goâ¦â

âWhat have you found?â Meg asked.

âThereâs a flight at nine tonight. You could catch the four oâclock train back to Melbourne and take the skybus to the airport. It all fits. Is that okay, Meg?â

âHeâs used to private cars,â Meg said, not looking at William. âBut it sounds okay.â She rose and headed out to the kitchen after Letty, tossing her words over her shoulder. Still carefully not looking at him. âIs that okay with you, William? You can have Christmas dinner and weâll drive you to the train.â

âHeâll need extra weight allowance after Grandmaâs pudding,â Scott joked and Letty hooted from the kitchen, but William didnât laugh.

He couldnât see Meg any more. She was behind the kitchen door, but he was willing to bet she didnât laugh either.

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âYou donât need to come to church,â Meg said, but sitting back at the farmhouse without them seemed unthinkable. So he went and Meg orchestrated things so she sat with Letty and Scott between them. She was wearing another of her new dressesâlilac, simpler than yesterdayâs, but just as pretty. Or

more pretty. Or maybe it was that he was looking at her more often.

The service was lovely, a tiny community coming together in happiness, belting out beloved Christmas hymns with enthusiasm and as much tunefulness as they could muster. William could only stand for the first two hymns because, some time between the second and the third, Letty leaned against his shoulder and went to sleep. Meg saw why he wasnât standing and she smiled at him, the smile heâd worked with for three years and hadnât noticed, and he thought it was worth holding Letty to receive that smile.

Though, if heâd had a choiceâ¦ He still would hold Letty, he thought, memories of yesterdayâs terror flooding back. She was an indomitable old lady and he could see why Meg loved her.

So he sat while the rest of the congregation sang and there were approving looks from many, and curious looks from more, and he thought Meg was going to get the full inquisition after he left.

After he leftâ¦

Maybe he could stay a few days more. Make sure Letty was okay. Give Kerrie a few more days off milking.

Get closer to Meg?

She was sharing a song sheet with Scott, and her voice was true and pure. He could hear her through the rest of the congregationâhe knew her voice.

He wouldnât hear it again.

He shouldnât be here. This wasnât his place. If he got closerâ¦

Heâd hurt her. He didnât know the first thing about family.

Heâd go home to his part-time dog, his part-time Foster-Friends role, his full-time career.

What was he doing? Surely he wasnât thinking he could stay here and milk cows for ever?

Maybe he could take Meg with him.

She wouldnât go.

âCollection,â Scott hissed, and he looked at him in incomprehension.

âMoney,â Scott said and grinned and William realised he was being handed the collection plate. Everyone in the pew was looking at him. They must have thought he was as sleepy as

Letty.

Before he could react, Meg dropped a note into the plate and handed it back to the server. âHeâs a bit tight,â she said, in a make-believe whisper which carried through the church. âHe hasnât had any work since before Christmas, you know.â

He stared at her in open-mouthed astonishment and she grinned and then chuckled and Letty stirred against him and opened her eyes.

âHave we sung *O Little Town of Bethlehem* yet?â

âNo,â he said, confounded.

âThen why donât we?â she demanded. âDonât they know our turkeyâs waiting?â

Â

Dinner came next. Kerrie arrived with her three children and it was hard to know who whooped louder, the children or Letty. Far too much food was consumed. The pudding flamed magnificently. Crackers were pulled. Silly jokes were read. Meg checked her watch for about the hundredth time and finally said, âItâs time to go.â

âIt is,â William said. âYouâll drive me to the station?â

âIâll drive you,â Letty said with alacrity and grinned. âMeg can do the washing-up.â

âLet Meg take him, Grandma,â Scott said with rare insight. âSheâll want to say goodbye.â

âI want to say goodbye,â Letty retorted.

Scott said, âGrandma,â in a meaningful voice and Letty gave a theatrical sigh and started clearing the table. But she wasnât exactly martyred. Kerrie and Scott were helping clear. Kerrie would stay on for milkingâtheyâd organised that at some time over pudding. Itâd only take Meg twenty minutes to take William to the station. Ten minutes there, ten minutes back and life would go on without him.

As it should.

Heâd already packed his bag. He rose from the still laden table and feltâ¦ empty.

âThank you,â he said simply and Letty looked at him as if he was a sandwich short of a picnic.

âThank us? After what youâve done for us?â

âIâll send you pictures of my car,â Scott said shyly. âAs it takes shape.â

âIâd like that.â

There was nothing else to say. Meg was already at the door, keys in her hand.

Ready to move on?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHY didnât he speak? The tension seemed unbearable. Thankfully, the station was only ten minutesâ drive, otherwise sheâd explode. Or something. She flicked on the radio and there were the inevitable Christmas carols. William flicked them straight off.

âWhatâs wrong with my carols?â she demanded, trying to sound offended.

âIâm crossing the time line tonight. Iâm facing another twenty-four hours of Christmas. Enough is enough.â

âTwo Christmases in a row. How appalling.â So much for offended. She knew she sounded miserable.

âMy Christmas isnât like your Christmas,â he told her. âTwo of my normal Christmases would be appalling.â

âWill you see your parents?â

âNo.â

âYou should. Even the media says theyâre lonely. Call them.â

âYouâre telling me how to run my life?â

âI forgot,â she said, suddenly contrite. âIâm still employed. I shouldnât tell you anything.â

âBut when youâre not employed?â

âWhen Iâm not employed I wonât be anywhere near you,â she whispered. There was more silence and then, thankfully, they arrived. She pulled up beside the platformâit really was in the middle of nowhere. But this was where she had to leave him.

âHere you are,â she managed, feeling ill. âThe train will be here in six minutes.â

He looked around him in doubt. âHow do I know youâre right with your timetable?â

âTrust me.â

âTrust you to leave me standing on a platform in the middle of nowhere, waiting for a train, when I only have your word for it that itâll come?â

She sighed. âOkay, Iâll wait. Sir. Do you want me to carry

your bag onto the station?â

âNo,â he said. âMegâ¦â

âWe need to be on the station. If the driver canât see us from a way ahead he wonât stop.â She headed onto the platform, leaving him to follow.

He followed.

More silence. They stood side by side in the middle of nowhere and he tried to think of something to say. So many things, but none of them suitable. None of them possible.

âReconsider your job,â he said at last and she shook her head.

âI canât.â

âBecause I kissed you?â

âI believe I resigned before that.â

âBecause I wanted to kiss you, then? And because when I did kiss you, it was wonderful?â

âWilliam, I canât cope with an affair,â she said simply. âAnd I canât cope with loving my boss.â

âLovingâ¦â The word made him feel as if heâd been punched.

âI donât, of course,â she said hastily. âItâs just that I might. Given time and enoughâ¦heat.â There was a faint speck on the horizon, a distant rumble and they both knew the train was on its way. âSoâ¦so itâs been fabulous. Iâve had the best time working for you and I canât begin to thank you for what youâve done for my family this Christmas.â

âThereâs no need to thank me.â Did he take her hands or did she take his? He didnât know. All he did know was that suddenly they were linked. The train was growing closer and she was justâ¦*here*.

He was holding Meg. Not Miss Jardine. He was definitely holding Meg. And he knew what he most wanted to say.

âCome with me,â he said urgently, and her eyes widened.

âWhat?â

âTo New York. You could have a second Christmas too.â

âIâve had Christmas.â The train was closer now. The driver had seen them and was starting to slow.

âI want you to come.â

âAnd leave Letty and Scott? Ring them up and say sorry, I wonât be home for tea, can you get someone to cover the milking?â She sounded a little hysterical. Panicked. Her hands tugged back, but he didnât let her go. âWhat are you saying?

Christmas in New Yorkâ¦ Thatâs crazy.â

He knew it was. âCrazy or not, I mean it.â

She met his gaze square on, and the flare of panic settled. âNo,â she said, sounding sure. âMy place is here. As yours is in Manhattan. Or Hong Kong. Or London. Wherever your business takes you. And hereâs your train. Say hello to Sheeba for me.â

âSheeba?â

âYour part-time dog,â she chided and he stared down at her and thoughtâpart-time dog, part-time life; he so didnât want to leave this woman.

But the alternative?

She couldnât go with him. There wasnât an alternative.

âGoodbye, William,â she said gently and pushed his hands a little, pushing him to let her go. Only the train hadnât quite stopped yet and his hold on her tightened.

âGoodbye, Meg.â There was a blast from the trainâs horn, as if the driver was saying get on fast; the train surely didnât want to waste time sitting at this windswept, sunburned country railway siding. No one would want to waste time here. Least of all him.

He had to leave.

But how could he leave when he was holding Meg?

He must.

He looked down into her eyes for one last time, and then, because there was no way he couldnât, he pulled her tight against him. He cupped her chin, he tilted her faceâand then he kissed her.

It was a fast kiss, fast by necessity as the train had now stopped. But still the kiss was strong and searching, and it ached to be more. For one precious moment she yielded against him, her mouth opened under his and she melted. Her body moulded against his and she was crushed against him.

Meg.

But the doors of the train were sliding open and the conductor was stepping onto the platform.

âAll aboard,â he snapped, straight at them, and there was no avoiding the inevitable. For one last moment Meg clung and he held, and then she was standing back and there was nothing he could do but lift his bag and board the train.

She drove home feeling sick. Life as she knew it was over.

Well, that was a stupid thing to think. She had cows to look forward to. And finding a local job. Plus there was a rather nice young farmer whoâd been interested before sheâd left to take the McMaster job. Letty told her every time she came home that he was still single. Maybe she could drum up some enthusiasm.

Only sheâd taken the job with William for a reason and the reason still stood. She loved the farm, but it wasnât enough.

Sheâd adored working for William. For Mr McMaster.

For William. He could never be Mr McMaster again. She knew that. He was too cute, too warm-hearted, tooâ¦hot.

And too needy. See, there was the problem. What really hurtâor, if she was honest, what hurt almost as much as missing himâwas the thought of him going back to his sterile life in Manhattan. Sure, he had his part-time kids and now he had his part-time dog. Sure, he thought he was happy. He was rich and confident and a powerful figure in the worldâs economy.

But he wouldnât call his parents and she guessed they wouldnât call him. Heâd probably call one of his Cool-To-Be-Seen-With women to fill in the gaps in his life, and that made her think dark thoughts about life in general and Cool-To-Be-Seen-With women in particular. She dredged up an image of the erstwhile Sarah, and imagined the picture as a dartboard.

How childish was that?

She *was* being childish. But there was more behind what she was feeling than childishness, and she knew what it was.

For sheâd fallen in love. Some time over the last two days, sheâd fallen hard. Maybe it had been latent, waiting in the wings to strike when the time was right. Maybe sheâd been in love with W S McMaster for years; she just hadnât known it.

And he was going home alone and she felt sickâand sad for him as well as for her. Heâd go back to the life he knew and she didnât envy him one bit. He might be rich and powerful but she had Scotty and Letty and the dogs.

She didnât have William.

Heâd asked her to go with him. How crazy was that? Oh, but sheâd wanted to. To board the train and leave, flying to

Manhattan with William, stepping into his lifeâ¦

His part-time life. For she was under no illusions as to what an affair with William would be. Sheâd made arrangements for too many such affairs in the past. Glorious indulgence and then mutual parting, no hard feelings.

She pulled the car off the road and got out. She walked round the car, then round again. It was no use going back to the farm until she had her head in order.

William was gone, and she had to move on. She had to walk into the kitchen at home and be cheerful.

Right. One more round of the car, or maybe two, and she could do it.

She must.

Â

He heaved his bag up onto the luggage rack and he thought for the first timeâhe *had* been preoccupied until nowâthat his bag was heavier than usual. And, almost as he thought it, the zip burst open.

His luggage was quality. Zips did not burst.

Nor did plastic bags and plastic containers spill out onto the floor of the train.

But, over Christmas, W S McMaster had become William, and someone had packed leftovers in Williamâs bag. The transparent containers held turkey, plum pudding, grapes, cherries, chocolates and more. There was also a plastic bottle labelled Brandy Sauce.

Meg would never do this. It must have been Letty. Meg was far too sensible to pack him leftovers.

Or was she?

Heâd get rid of it at the airport, he thought, gathering the containers while bemused passengers watched. He travelled first class. Leftovers compared to the airlineâs best haute cuisine?

But then he thought, this was Lettyâs cooking and Jennyâs cooking. Maybe there was even Megâs cooking in there somewhere. Sheâd definitely stirred the pudding.

Maybe he wouldnât get rid of it.

He started shoving the containers back into his bag and realised there was something deeper. He delved and foundâ¦a

bazooka. Complete with foam bullets. It was the same as the ones Letty and Scott had found in their stockings, orange, purple and gold. A note was attached.

To William. I had huge trouble finding you one of these at short notice but I knew youâd be jealous of Letty and Scott so, with Mickeyâs help, hereâs your very own. I thought it might cheer you up when you reach home. You and Pip and Ned can play with it in Central Park. Just donât take it on board your plane as hand luggage. You could get into Very Serious Trouble. Love Meg.

Ridiculous.

Butâ¦ He *had* been jealous this morning as Letty and Scott had shot each other. As if he was on the outside looking in.

Pip and Ned would think this was cool. *He* thought it was cool. He wanted to try it out now.

Or not. Mature businessmen did not shoot foam bazookas on trains.

He read the note again.

Love Meg.

Donât go there.

He stowed the bazooka. He managed to get his bag refastened, and finally sank into his seat.

The train was almost empty. Of course. It was Christmas night. Whoâd be travelling tonight except people going from one family to another?

There was a young mother in the seat opposite, hugging her baby. Maybe she wasnât going from one family to another. She looked wan and tear-stained.

The W S McMaster of Friday would hardly have noticed. But nowâ¦ âAre you okay?â he asked.

âIâ¦yes. Thank you.â She managed a watery smile; she clearly wanted to talk. âMy husbandâs working on an offshore oil rig so we can save a deposit for a house. We only have one week together a month. Itâs only for a year but I hate being a part-time family. And I have to go back to my parents tonightâ¦ Nightâs my favourite time. When the dayâs over, snuggling down and talking about itâ¦ Oh, I miss him. I love him so much.â

She sniffed and blew her nose and there was nothing he could

say to make her feel better. He retrieved some of his leftover chocolates. They shared their chocolate and their silence, and neither of them was happy.

I love him so muchâ¦

There was a lot in that statement to avoid thinking about. He decided heâd think about the rest.

Nightâs my favourite timeâ¦

He hated Christmas night. Christmas Day was usually bearableâthere were always social functions, and last year heâd had Pip and Ned. Only at the endâ¦

When the dayâs over, snuggling down and talking about itâ¦

That was what was missing. Heâd never figured it out. How could he miss what heâd never known?

Christmas night aloneâ¦ He always did Christmas night alone.

Maybe heâd be home in time to see Pip and Ned.

He checked his phone and then remembered. No reception.

âYou can ring when we go through towns,â the girl told him. âOnly you need to talk fast.â

When the dayâs over, snuggling down and talking about itâ¦

The last twenty-four hours had been huge. Who could he talk about it with?

They were approaching a town. Sure enough, reception bars appeared on his cellphone. He rang Manhattan. Elinor. She answered on the first ring.

âWhatâs wrong?â She sounded breathless and he realised it was one in the morning back home. Night-time.

When the dayâs over, snuggling down and talking about itâ¦

âIâm sorry,â he said. âIâve woken you.â

âOh, Mr McMaster, itâs you,â she said. âNo, I was just stuffing stockings, so you didnât wake me. Iâm glad you rang. I have such good news.â

âYou do?â

âThe childrenâ¦ Their motherâs finally agreed to their adoption. The agency contacted me this morning. Thereâs a coupleâ¦ They lost their children in a car accident five years ago and they so want a family. They sound lovely and thereâs grandmas and grandpas; everything these children most need. So tomorrow, after Christmas lunch, theyâre coming to visit. Itâs only first contact, but oh, they sound nice. These children so

need a family.â

âThey do,â he said and somehow he managed to keep his voice from sounding bereft. Bereft? Of all the stupid sensationsâ¦

And Elinor heard itâhe knew she did. âThereâs so many needy children out there,â she said, her voice growing sombre. âYou know that. Thereâs always more to be looked after.â

And he heard her pain as well. Sheâd be giving up these children and moving on. âOh, Elinor.â She loved with all her heart. You didnât love without hurting. Where had he learned that? Was he just starting?

âYeah, it hurts,â she said across his thoughts, and he could almost see her steeling herself. âBut, if you donât love, then you might as well stop living. This family live right nearby so weâll see each other in the park. So how about you? Will we see you tomorrow? I mean, today?â

âMy flight wonât get in until late.â

âOh, the children will be disappointed,â she said, but in a tone that said not too disappointed; they were about to meet their new mommy and daddy. What more did children need for Christmas?

âSo youâll be flying all Christmas,â she said. âIâm so sorry.â

âThereâs no need to be sorry,â he said, startled.

âWell, there is,â she said, and she sounded truly concerned. âItâs time you stayed put. I know youâre important and I know youâre busy but you have a good heart, Mr McMaster, and itâs time you found somewhere to park it. Iâve done my share of parking in my time, but have you? You need to find somewhere you can leave it for good.â

The train had streamed through the town and out the other side. Reception was starting to break up. He could barely hear.

Maybe it was just as well, William thought. What sort of advice was this? He wished her Merry Christmas, but he didnât hear a response. He clicked off his phone and stared out of the window. Trying not to replay her words.

âBad news?â the young mother asked.

âIâ¦no. Good news, really.â

âYou donât look like it was good news.â

âItâs okay.â

He wanted to tell her about it. Onlyâ¦if he told herâ¦how could he make it sound like good news? Sheâd guess how he felt,

he thought, as Elinor had guessed. As Meg would guess?

He wanted to tell Meg.

When the dayâs over, snuggling down and talking about itâ¦

Such a thing wasnât for him. For a McMaster toâ¦snuggleâ¦Unthinkable.

He stared out at the sparse Australian landscape, so unlike Manhattan, and he thought of his familyâthe McMaster dynasty. Damaged people all. Deeply unhappy. Poisoned by wealth and by social expectations. Unhappy unions had created unhappy children, and on it went, for generation after generation, spreading outward.

How could he ask someone to join such a family?

He couldnât. Heâd sworn he never would. But, if notâ¦

The thought came from nowhere, and it started as a jumble. A Christmas tree with decorations from childhood. Lettyâs mango trifle. Cows and dogs. Gumboots parked at the back door. Megâs laughterâ¦

Crazy Santa legs. Scott amid a jumble of Mini parts. The feel of Meg against him in the emergency room.

This was a family so unlike his own it was unbelievable, and the jumbled thought unravelled, settled and finally left a clear thought that was amazing.

If his family was unworkableâ¦

Maybe he could join another?

The conductor was coming through now, checking tickets and, before he could take the thought any further, he found himself asking, âIs there another train tonight?â

âTo where?â

âTo where I got on.â

âTo Tandaroit? You have to be joking. Once a day to Tandaroit. Next train leaves tomorrow night from Melbourne.â

âDo you want to go back?â the woman across the way asked as the conductor moved on.

âMaybe,â William said, feeling dazed.

âTo the girl you were kissing on the station?â

And there it was, front and centre. The girl heâd been kissing on the station.

âWho is she?â the woman asked and he managed a smile.

âShe was Miss Jardine,â he said softly. âBut nowâ¦her name is Meg.â

CHAPTER TWELVE

MEG liked Christmas night, or she always had. Christmas was huge, busy, noisy, fun, and it left her happy. Even the first appalling Christmas after the accident, she and Letty had managed to make it fun and sheâd slept that night feeling just a little bit optimistic about the future.

So why wasnât she feeling optimistic now?

Kerrie stayed and helped with the milking while Letty and Scott cleaned up inside and minded the children. After tea, they loaded the sleeping children into Kerrieâs car and bade them goodnight. Kerrie drove off and Meg found herself feeling jealous. Kerrie would be snuggling the children into bed.

Umâ¦ Kerrie was a struggling single mother who worked herself raw. Was she jealous because she had babies?

Was she jealous of what they represented?

Scott and Letty went to bed, tired and happy after what they decreed had been an awesome Christmas. âWe should invite William every year,â Scott said sleepily and Meg felt even more bereft.

The dogs had eaten too many leftovers. They were asleep; useless as company.

She went across to the home paddock to talk to Millicent, but Millicent was snoozing as well.

She walked back to the house, kicking stones, disconsolate. Santa was still waving back and forth in his chimney.

âI wonder if I can shoot him down with one of the bazookas? â she asked herself but she couldnât dredge up a smile.

She didnât want to smile. She wanted to wallow.

She climbed into her pyjamas and went to bed. She thumped her pillows for a while, then gave up and headed back into the kitchen to pour herself the last of the eggnog. She stared into its depths and then carefully tipped it down the sink.

âLetâs not drown our sorrows here,â she told herself. âWe

need to be nice and sober to read the Job Vacancy ads tomorrow.â

She sniffed. âOoh, whoâs maudlin? And I havenât even drunk my eggnog.â

William would be back in Melbourne now. She looked at her watch. No. William would be in the sky.

She glanced out of the window at the stars beyond. Nothing and nothing and nothing.

Andâ¦something. A tiny light, growing brighter.

It was a small plane, she thought, low in the east. Some private charter, going places now the restrictions were lifted. Good for them.

The light was getting brighter. Brighter still. And the soundâ¦

Not a plane, then. A helicopter.

Closer still. Low and fast.

Whoâ¦?

And then she thoughtâ¦

No.

Yes?

This was stupid. She was imagining things. Maybe thereâd been an accident somewhere close and this was an air transfer. Thatâd be it.

But it was over their land now. Hovering. Lights were beaming down.

Itâd panic the cows.

But, even as she thought it, she realised it wasnât hovering over the cow pastures. The paddock underneath was at the eastern extremity of the property, where the hay had been slashed only yesterday.

Whoever was in the chopper knew the paddock was bare. Knew the paddock was safe.

Itâd beâ¦ Itâd beâ¦

She darenât think who itâd be.

It wouldnât be William.

But the chopper was on her land.

The dogs had heard. Killer was at the kitchen door, his head to one side, listening.

âIâll take you with me,â she told him, and then as the rest of the pack appeared, she nodded. âOkay, maybe I do need

protection. Letâs all go and investigate.â

Â

He stood in the paddock and he thought, whoa, itâs a long way to the house. He knew he couldnât scare the cows; he knew this paddock would be a safe place to land, but stillâ¦

âWhereâs a limousine when you need it?â The pilot was enjoying himself. Yes, heâd been pulled away from his family Christmas, but heâd had his Christmas dinner and the bonus heâd been promised made him very happy indeed. âMaybe I could take you over the house and lower you on a rope,â he told him, grinning, and William thought, whereâs the respect? Heâd made the mistake of chatting to Steve about his family, and look where it got him.

And then he saw Lettyâs wagon bumping across the paddocks and he stopped thinking about Steveâhe stopped thinking of anything but Meg.

Was it Meg? The car came to a halt, the driverâs door opened, but, before he could see who it was five dogs tumbled out, enveloping him in a sea of canine ecstasy.

Heâd been at the farm for three days. By the dogsâ reaction, they were his lifelong friends and heâd been gone for years.

He kind of liked it. But stillâ¦ Hopefully, Meg was behind them. He managed to shove the dogs aside. The pack descended on Steve, who backed into his cockpit. The dogs jumped right up after him. Hopefully, the machine was hard to start, otherwise they risked flight by dog. Whatever, William was too busy looking at Meg to do anything about it.

For she was here.

She was wearingâ¦pyjamas? Pink silk with tiny stars and moons all over. Silver stars. His sense of unreality deepened. Her hair was messed as if sheâd been asleep. She looked rumpled and sexy and so fabulous he wanted to scoop her into his arms right then and there.

Think of something to say, Stupid, he told himself but he was having trouble. Tonight had made sense to him at the planning stage. Now he was having trouble getting started.

âYou had to bring the dogs,â he managed, as a muffled grunt emerged from the cockpit.

âAnyone could be landing in our hay paddock. On the chance

that you could be enemy alien cow poachersâ¦â

âYou came wearing pyjamas?â

âI have a loaded bazooka under these pyjamas.â

He eyed the pyjamas. They were silky and clinging andâ¦

No. Donât think of what might or might not be under those pyjamas. Definitely not a bazooka.

What to say? He gazed at Meg, at her adorably confused face, at her wonderful stars and moons, at her dishevelled hair. This was Meg, the woman he loved with all his heart, and he knew he had to go forward.

The woman he loved with all his heartâ¦

When had he figured this out? Just then, he thought. Heâd known he had to come. Heâd planned to come. But now, looking at her, he knew for sure.

All those corny movies heâd watched as a lonely childâ¦they were right. Throw your hat into the ring. Jump.

âI had to come back for you,â he said simply, his gaze not leaving her face.

âI said I couldnât come with you,â she whispered, sounding awed.

âYou donât need to come. I didnât come back to fetch you. I came back to be with you.â

âPâ¦pardon?â

âI came back because I love you,â he said, strongly now, more sure. âI came back because when it came down to it I couldnât leave.â

âYou love me?â She said it wonderingly, and he knew the alien thing was still in her mind. She said it as if his words were some sort of fantasy that had no connection to reality.

It was up to him to make her see this was real. That this was true.

âI do love you.â It was as serious as any wedding vow. He took a step towards her but she held up her hands as if to ward him off. As if she was afraid.

Behind him, Steve was still surrounded by dogs. He couldnât be holding five collars, yet the dogs were all still. It was as if they sensed how important this was.

Was this important to a chopper pilot? To dogs?

Why not? It was the whole world to him.

âMeg, I need to know,â he said roughly, because he couldnât bear to wait a moment longer. âWhen you talked about lovingâ¦ Did you mean it? That you could love me?â

âI might,â she whispered, and his world settled. Things were falling into place that heâd never realised were out of kilter until now. That heâd known this woman for three long years and not loved herâ¦ How could he have been so blind?

How could he waste another moment? It was killing him not to take her into his arms but he knew he shouldnât.

Do not rush this.

As if falling in love in three days, hiring a helicopter in the middle of the night, telling her he wanted her right now, wasnât rushing things.

Okay, do not rush this even more.

So say it. Lay the whole plan on the line.

âI can move here,â he said and Megâs face froze.

âHere?â

âItâs not impossible.â

âI think I need to sit.â

âCan I hold you up?â

âNot until I figure what youâre talking about.â

âMy plans.â

âI like plans,â she said faintly. âOkay, talk.â

So he talked. âIâll explain fast,â he said, and it had to be fast because if he didnât hold her soon heâd go up in smoke. âI propose to base myself here. No, wrong, I propose we base ourselves here, because I need you, Meg, in business, in every facet of my life. Youâre smart and intuitive and funny and I want you with me every step of the way. So what Iâd really like is to build here, set up headquarters here. Keep the farm but add to it. Weâd need a helicopter pad. I fancy a swimming pool. And I bet a gymnasium would really help Scott.â

âScottâ¦â

âHeâs part of it. Heâs part of your life. Family.â

âWilliamâ¦â

âI know,â he said hurriedly, afraid to stop, afraid of how sheâd respond. âItâs just it was a really long train ride back to Melbourne, and making plans is what Iâm principally good at. I thought we could restore the old cottage on the other side of the dairy and ask Kerrie if sheâd consider living here. Letty told me

it was a dream of yours and it sounds good to me. That means weâd always have a milker on hand. Thenâ¦maybe we could employ a nannyâ¦â

âA nanny,â she said, astonished.

âFor Kerrieâs kids,â he said hurriedly. âAnd forâ¦for whoever else might come along. That means you and I can travel, whenever we wish. Thereâs so muchâ¦ Itâll take us years to sort it out, but we will. We can. If we want to. If you want to. Whatâ¦what do you think?â

There was a long, long pause. The enemy alien cow poacher was still in the back of her mind, he thought, but slowly, slowly, he watched her expression change. She was searching his face and what she saw seemed to change things.

âI thinkâ¦â she whispered, but then her voice firmed. âI think Iâd never leave our kids with a nanny,â she said, and suddenly the woman in the pink silk pyjamas was smiling.

His heart gave a leap. *Iâd never leave our kidsâ¦* There were all sorts of assumptions in that statement, and he liked them all.

âHow many kids would you like?â he asked tenderly.

âWilliam!â

Maybe he had to throw in a few more inducements. Maybe he still didnât have it right. How to talk of loveâ¦ It seemed so fragileâand all he had was words. Not now.

âYou know, Letty and Scotty could travel with us too, if they like,â he said hurriedly. âThey could see Manhattan. And London and Hong Kong. I think theyâd like it. But Iâm serious about only travelling when I must.â He hesitated. âYou know, I didnât get this right. My parents taught me personal stuff was a disaster so I buried myself in work. But youâ¦you enjoy what you do for me, yes?â

âI love it,â she said simply.

âYet you love the farm.â

âYes.â

âAs I like pulling silencers off cars.â

âDo you?â

âI do,â he said and it was a vow. She was looking at him very strangely but heâd startedâhe had to explain. And he was struggling to explain it to himself.

Wordsâ¦ Find the right words, he told himself. Get it right.

Say the love word.

âIâve been thinkingâ¦if I could mix grease guns with business, then maybe I could mix loving in there somewhere as well,â he tried, but it didnât sound right.

âIn the spare bits?â

âNo,â he said, sure of himself on this one. âIn all my bits. In my business. In my spare time, in my hobbies, in my dreams. I want loving in all of it. Meg, I want you.â

She looked stunned. She looked star-struck. âYouâre truly serious?â

And there was only one answer to that. âIâve never been more serious about anything in my life,â he said simply. âNo matter what happens, at the end of every day of my life I want to lie in bed with you.â

âAndâ¦talk?â she managed, and there was the beginning of laughter in her lovely eyes.

âOr anything else that might occur to us,â he told her, smiling, loving her with all his heart, and suddenly she chuckled, a lovely deep ripple of wonder, and he thought he might just have got this right.

âSo will you marry me?â he asked, for what else was there to say?

She gasped. âYou want to marry me?â

âYes.â Thenâ¦ âBut I do have a problem,â he was forced to admit. âTry as I might, Christmas night is not a time to buy a ring.â

âNot?â she said and she laced her voice with such a depth of disappointment that he wasnât sure where the chuckle ended and sincerity began.

Aargh. He had everything right except this. But then Killer took a leap from the chopper and lumbered over. Dangling from his collar was his dog tag. It was a ringâof sorts.

âExcuse me, Killer,â he said and flicked off the collar and removed the tag. âCan I borrow this until the shops reopen?â

âI donât believe this,â Meg said faintly.

âWe need to organise new tags, anyway,â William said, refastening the collar. âIâm shipping Sheeba out here as soon as I possibly can.â

âYouâre shipping Sheebaâ¦â

âI figure you have one dog; Letty has two and Scott has two. When I decided to stay, I took out my Christmas card and stared at the picture of Sheeba and thoughtâhow could I turn my back on such a fine gift? But Iâm not doing part-time anything any more, so she gets to be full-time. Iâm hoping she likes being a farm dog, but how could she not?â And then, because this seemed as good a time as any, he dropped on one knee and held out the dog tag. âSo, Miss Jardineâ¦â

âMeg,â she said sharply.

âMeg,â he said, suitably chastened. âMy love.â

âThatâs much better.â She was smiling mistily down at him. *âMy love* is way better than Meg.â

âHey!â It was a piercing shout and he turned, groaning. But the shout and the associated rumble couldnât be ignored.

For it was Letty and Scott, bouncing over the paddocks towards them on the ancient farm tractor. âDonât you dare propose until we get there,â Letty yelled in a voice that was truly scary.

âAm I so obvious?â he demanded of his love and his love chuckled and behind them Steve laughed and Killer started barking.

âMy loveâ¦â he started urgently, but Meg put her finger on his lips and hushed him. She tugged him up and she smiled.

âI wouldnât have it any other way,â she whispered. âIn front of witnesses.â

âYou have to be joking.â

âYouâve been a loner all your life, William McMaster. No more.â

So he waited. With a promise like that, a man could wait. He waited until Letty and Scott were in full earshot and theyâd introduced themselves to Steve and they were holding the dogs back and then Letty said, âOkay, get on with it.â

And William, who was feeling absurdly self-conscious, suddenly thought no.

âNo,â he said.

âNo?â Meg said.

âSteve, how many does that chopper hold?â

âSix,â Steve said.

âThree people and five dogs?â

âAt a push.â

âThen there are free chopper flights on offer,â he said. âStarting now. You guys can watch, but from above. Take it or leave it. Witnesses from above, but not right here.â

âOh, cool,â Scotty said, high with excitement. âCome on, Grandma, who wants to listen to a soppy proposal when we can ride in a chopper? And it is,â he added conscientiously, âtheir business anyway.â

So, before Letty knew what she was about, her grandson had bundled her into the chopper. The dogs were tossed up after. The doors were clanged shut and the chopper rose into the night sky.

But not very far. William might have intended that Steve take them far away. Steve had other ideas.

The chopper simply hovered. Its downlight nailed them.

âYou were saying?â Meg yelled at the top of her lungs, laughing, and William thought he was never, ever going to be able to do this better than he could right now. He was standing in the middle of a hay paddock. A helicopter was practically blasting him to bits with its down-draught. The moon was high in the night sky, and over at the house Santaâs legs moved steadily back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

âHappy Christmas,â he shouted, and he tried again for the third time. Third time lucky? âWill you marry me?â

âWhat?â The sound of the chopper was deafening.

âWith this ring, I thee wed?â he shouted back and he placed the tag on her finger and he scooped her up and lifted her high into his arms, holding her hard against his heart. And finally he kissed her as he needed to kiss her, as she needed to be kissed, as he intended to kiss her for the rest of her life.

âIâll give you diamonds,â he yelled when they could finally bear to pull apart.

âWho needs diamonds?â Meg said lovingly. He could barely hear her words but he knew what her lips were saying. It was what his heart was saying.

âMerry Christmas, my love,â she told him. âDiamonds or not, I just need you.â

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CHRISTMAS WITH HER BOSS

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